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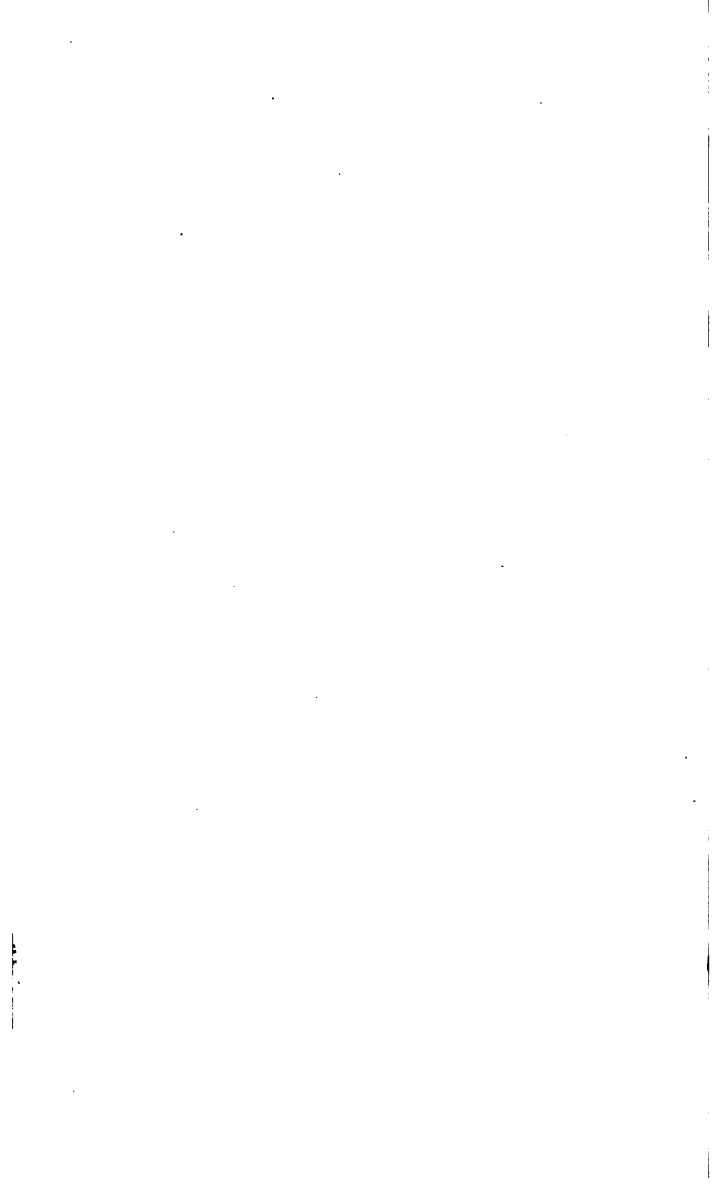
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IRRALIE'S BUSHRANGER

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IRRALIE'S BUSHRANGER

CHAPTER I

ARMS AND A MAN

“Cooooooooo-eeeeee !”

The voice was very hoarse and far away. But Irralie had fancied she heard something before. And this time she felt sure enough to stop the horses in their own length, while she herself stood up to peer this way and that across the tufts of salt-bush and the spaces of pure sand.

Yet at first no sign of life intervened between the buggy and the Seven-mile Whim whose black timbers stood out like a gallows against the setting sun. The whim, however, was a league away. Irralie accordingly looked right and left; and on the right a five-wire fence ran east and west into twilit

space ; but on the left a clump of box-trees grew a couple of hundred paces from the track. Clearly the clump was the place ; and, even as she turned her horses, the girl saw a flash and a puff on its outskirts, followed by a sharp report.

Irralie Villiers was used to firearms. A dead Riverina turkey and an empty fowling-piece lay at her feet at the present moment ; and the shot from the clump only made her urge her horses the harder in its direction. It was obviously a signal of distress, and a little rough driving showed Irralie who had fired it. - A tall, ragged fellow stood with his back to the trees, as still as they ; his wide-awake was on the ground in front of him, and the wet hair clung to his white forehead. Also on the ground, in separate heaps, lay a shrunken bay horse and a singularly shabby saddle, bridle, and valise.

The girl drove up with a single word :

“ Water ? ”

“ Have you got any ? ” cried the man, spitting out a leaf as he came forward.

"No; but jump up, and I'll drive you straight to the tank. Can your horse move?"

"We'll see."

And the man knelt over the helpless animal, slipped on the bridle, and coaxed it to its four feet.

"Now tie him on behind," said Irralie, "and put your saddle and valise under the seat. There's a tank not a mile from this spot."

"If only I'd known!"

"You couldn't. How long have you gone without?"

"Oh, for hours; not that there's much wrong with me; it was the poor brute knocked up, not I."

"I should have said you were at death's door by all that shouting and shooting!"

The man laughed, showing beneath a heavy mustache a row of teeth more than presentable. He had fallen asleep beside his horse, and awoke only just in time. Another moment, and the buggy would have

been out of earshot ; there was no time to give chase, but only to do as he had done. Certainly he felt queer for want of water ; but that was all.

Meanwhile, Irralie was steering her horses across country to the tank, and that as fast as the bay could follow. Leaning back at her side, the man scrutinized his deliverer with a glance bold to insolence. The girl was very young, and tall and slim ; yet bodily weakness was as little apparent under the close-fitting sleeves of that period as infirmity of purpose in the alert, good-tempered, sunburnt face. Her hair and eyebrows were absolutely black ; the latter, indeed, a little heavy for her sex ; but the eyes themselves were the blue, continual havens of a smile no lips could equal, and the girl was written fearless and frank by her mere expression. A hearty voice and a blunt way of speaking were further characteristics, duly noted by the time the tank was reached, and man and beast drinking ravenously side by side.

The former was dressed like a common

stockman — with a difference in the stockman's favor. He wore the orthodox rough shirt and baggy mole-skins; but the humble legging was replaced by a riding-boot of piratical length; and from a pocket of the dilapidated, loose coat there peeped the butt end of the revolver recently discharged. Now, revolvers were not even then in everyday use in the bush; nor were long boots often seen in the stirrups of the common stockman; and the girl felt a puzzled awe in thus encountering so new a type. She was taken, however, with her *protégé's* appearance, which was quite romantically devil-may-care; and she chiefly viewed him with a very genuine curiosity as he returned to the buggy, dashing the water from his long mustache.

"Now we can push on for ourselves," said he. "You have saved us both, and we are grateful. Allow me to relieve you of my saddle and valise."

"But may I ask where you are going?"

"Surely; to the station."

"This station? Arran Downs?"

"Why, yes; but I really can't think of putting you to any more trouble. I am quite well able to ride——"

"Nonsense!" said Irralie. "Your horse isn't quite well able to carry you. What *do* you ride?"

"Fourteen stone or so."

"Then tie him on again, and jump up at once."

It was done with a shrug—and subsequent alacrity.

"Then you belong to this station?" said the man, reseating himself in the failing light. But Irralie preferred to regain the track in safety before replying; and the question was put again.

"Oh, yes! I'm the manager's daughter. I beg your pardon; now it's all right, we're in the straight."

"You are, then, a Miss Villiers?"

"I am."

"And you think nothing of driving about alone with a buggy and pair?"

“Nothing in the world. The gates are the only drawback. Do you mind opening this one?”

“Not in the least.”

She waited for him in the farther paddock.

“You’re not coming for work, I suppose?”

“Well, I wasn’t.”

“To stay?”

“Yes, if I can be put up.”

“No doubt it can be done. But you’re a parlor man?”

“A parlor man!”

“I mean to say you’re for the house, not for the hut?” said Irralie, judging him by the ear rather than the eye, and not very certain of him yet. “You see, we put up everybody; only the men go to the traveller’s hut, and the—the——”

“Exactly! Well, I had thought of the house; still, if you’re full——”

“We are fuller than usual; but of course there’ll be room. And you will be welcome to it. But I wish you would tell me one

thing: why on earth do you carry about a loaded revolver?"

In the buggy there was silence. Irralie glanced over her left shoulder, but now there was darkness too.

"Isn't it the proper thing to do?" he asked at length.

"Far from it," replied Irralie, severely.

"But what about bushrangers?"

"Bushrangers! There are none. They are all dead and gone."

"What about—Stingaree?"

"Stingaree! I forgot him. He's the man who stuck up the Mount Brown gold-escort. Oh, yes, I've heard a lot about Stingaree."

"I wonder what you have heard."

"That he's a bit of a duke—in fact, an Oxford man!"

"Would you know him by sight?"

"I shouldn't; but, as it happens, we have a man here who would."

"A man I shall meet to-night?"

"Oh, no! a whim-driver—the whim-

driver at the far end of the last paddock—our Seven-mile. ‘Deaf Dawson,’ the men call him. He once knew Stingaree, he says; but he hardly ever comes into the home-station. You must go out to the Seven-mile if you want to interview him, and you’ve got to do that through his ear-trumpet! He’ll tell you Stingaree never came so far south as this in his life; and *I* tell you he’d better not.”

“You would give him a pretty bad time, eh, Miss Villiers?”

“*My* word!” said Irralie.

“I’m glad to hear it,” replied the other devoutly, “for I carry that pistol solely on account of Stingaree! I wasn’t to know he drew the line at a given degree of latitude.”

“I don’t say he does,” returned the girl.

“I only say he better had!”

Again they drove in silence into the night; then the moon got up in their teeth, and licked the barrels of Irralie’s fowling-piece.

“Why, you carry firearms yourself! I’d forgotten that, Miss Villiers.”

"I do ; but not revolvers," said Irralie, "and not because of Stingaree."

"I see !"

"But to shoot fair game," concluded Irralie, severely. "To-day it was a fatted turkey for the great occasion of to-morrow's Sunday dinner."

"It is to be a great occasion, then ?"

"You bet it is !" cried Irralie Villiers. "You mayn't have heard that this station has been bought by a new chum of an Englishman with a handle to his name ? But it has, though ; and much we care about the handle ! A beggarly younger son, that's all he is ; but if he was a lord and a duke in one it would make no difference to us ! He'll make a fine mess of it, that's one thing sure. Fullarton his name is—the Honorable Greville Fullarton ! Put that in your pipe and light it."

"And—and what do you expect him to be like ?"

"Don't ask," replied the girl, warmly. "Nice words couldn't tell you. However,

we shall find him at the homestead when we get in ; and there are the lights."

Her companion looked sidelong at Irralie ; then, hesitating, at the constellation of lights which had burst upon them unawares ; and so made up his mind.

"We shall *not* find him there," said he, with a nervous laugh. "I'm sorry to confirm your worst suspicions, but the fact is, Miss Villiers, I'm the man himself!"

CHAPTER II

A BAD IMPRESSION

Who was the Hon. G. Fullarton, and what did he want with a station in New South Wales? These and kindred questions were bandied from block to block of the honored territory; but only the first was susceptible to a plain, straightforward reply.

The pedigree of the young man could be ascertained from accessible sources; his motives (when he had any) were somewhat farther to seek. Pleasure, idleness, and adventure were the gods of this reactionary offspring of a peer who was also a divine; yet the *mauvais sujet* of this ancient family would have been the stainless pride of many another of equal antiquity but inferior ideals. Greville Fullarton had never been bankrupt, nor party to a scandalous suit, nor a living

excuse of any sort or kind for the blasphemies of the half-penny evening enemy. On the other hand, he was the impious member of a family otherwise united in piety—a goat among sheep, a wanderer, a ne'er-do-weel, and a chronic grief to good gray hairs.

How he came by the money for Arran Downs—which was purchased in a good season, when the head of sheep ran very nearly into six figures—was as great a mystery in the old country as in the new. Yet in London they told a little story, which rather lent itself to deduction, where one happened to know how little the old Earl had spent on himself, and how much he must be worth.

It was said that Mr. Greville had dropped from the clouds into his father's town house one morning in time for prayers, but clad in Californian rags, and such boots that even the Earl could not permit him to kneel down before the servants. He had been two years away, and in all that time had written not at all. But it was said he related his

adventures on this occasion with so much frankness and vivacity that the old peer was moved to lament the purposeless character of his son's exploits rather than those exploits themselves. And here the story ends ; but that same season saw the purchase of Arran Downs through London agents, and Esau started at the summer's end for another summer in one of the few wildernesses he had yet to explore.

The day had been hot indeed for the end of October, when the thermometer rarely touches a hundred in the shade ; but even at that temperature Mrs. Villiers had not rested from sorting linen, selecting napery, cleaning silver, and watching over the Chinese cook in the wattle-and-dab kitchen. All day the storekeeper had been cleaning out his store, the overseer running up fresh horses from outlying paddocks, and Mr. Villiers himself fixing new ropes on two of the whims. For the rest, Miss Villiers (as we have seen) had been following the chase, and her younger brothers and sisters a less

exciting routine with their raw, strict, public-school tutor.

At Arran Downs a single note had been received from the new owner naming the day he was likely to arrive. As the hour was not mentioned, all things were ready by about the middle of the day; and by evening the feeling of the garrison expressed itself in a universal inability to sit down. The veranda was paced as though it had been a vessel's deck—the horizon swept as though it had been the sea. At six there was open dissatisfaction, and the young Villierses, who had been decently dressed, and even partially subdued, for some hours—these young ruffians broke out, and drove their tutor in despair to the school-room, because his jurisdiction did not extend beyond those weather-board walls.

But when night set in, Mr. Villiers (a blue-eyed man with a fair beard and bad teeth) was heard to close his watch with a snap and to announce that he would wait no longer. The new owner might be given up

for that night ; as for Irralie, she had no business to be so late, but something could be kept hot for her. Luckily, however, they had not sat down when Irralie and the owner arrived together, evidently on the best of terms already. For Irralie introduced him, briefly explaining what had happened, but dwelling very lightly (it was noteworthy) on the incident at the clump, and never mentioning the pistol-shot at all. Fullarton shook hands all round with the utmost geniality. It was too dark in the veranda for his extremely rough exterior to be appreciated, and Mr. Villiers made his prepared speech with a glibness which he afterwards regretted.

“I must apologize, Mr. Fullarton, for being still here with my belongings ; but as I didn't know your arrangements, I thought we had better all hold on till you came. They thought so in Melbourne too. Everything is ready for you, however, and I think I may say in no bad order either.”

The new owner slapped the other on the back.

“My dear sir, I hope to goodness you aren't thinking of deserting me? Do you expect me to run this place by myself, and without knowing how? Let things go on as they are for another year at least; then, if we must, we can talk of it again.”

In the same manner he very properly declined to take the head of his own dinner-table; and the impression was distinctly favorable until the rough shirt and ragged coat came to anchor immediately under the lamp. There fell then an embarrassed silence. Mrs. Villiers had made herself a new gown for the occasion. The tutor had saved up his tallest collar. Everybody had made some little difference, and the condition of the Englishman was an inexplicable insult to one and all.

Heavy, excellent George Young, the overseer, was perhaps the most indignant spirit at the table. But the English tutor, Hodding by name, endured the keenest dis-

appointment. The overseer and the store-keeper were natives of the colony ; so were the entire managerial brood. Hodding had counted upon the arrival of an even newer chum than himself ; he had pictured a sufficiently taking type, in rough English tweeds and ponderous boots. The same lively fancy had painted every cornstalk green with envy ; and what had happened ? Jevons, the storekeeper, was kicking him under the table ; honest George Young looked green, indeed, but not with envy ; and the son of an Earl was eating as heartily as if he looked what he was, instead of calling to every mind the common, ruffianly, pound-a-week hand.

“ There is one more thing I must apologize for,” said Mr. Villiers, a little tactlessly, before they left the table. “ We hardly thought to see you before the Cup ; and we expect a few folks here on Monday night, on their way down to it.”

“ To the Melbourne Cup ? ” said the owner, with his mouth full. “ Yes, I hear

it's a great race ; but the turf's about the only evil I ever steered clear of." And he continued to eat, as he had eaten from the beginning, like a half-starved man.

The manager hummed. His confession was not yet complete.

"The fact is," he continued, "we thought it an opportunity to entertain our friends—possibly our last. To tell you the truth, we have something like a party on the day after to-morrow. When I got your letter I did think of putting it off. But, on second thoughts, that struck me as all the more reason for a general muster of such society as we can boast in these wilds. It was an opportunity for the country-side to meet you, Mr. Fullarton."

The owner looked up aghast.

"To meet *me* ?" he cried.

"Why, yes, to be sure. They are all most anxious to make your acquaintance. You must know that you have supplied our papers with a topic for these many weeks past."

"But look at my clothes!" cried the other. "You must have noticed them; and I would have apologized for them before, Mrs. Villiers, had I not felt too ashamed. It is all owing to a mistake. I have nothing better in my valise. But I believe my portmanteaus are on the way up by the coach."

"That's all right; then they'll be here to-morrow," said the manager, with relief only second to that of the tutor. "And now if you'll join me in a pipe on the veranda—for I haven't a cigar fit to offer you—I believe the Company have furnished you with some little papers which we ought to look into together?"

All had risen from the table, and with a fortunate precipitancy the younger men had left the room. There were witnesses enough, however, of the painful flush which now suffused the features of the new owner. And Irralie was one.

"I am very much afraid," he stammered, "that I have lost the papers you—you——"

And without finishing his sentence, he fumbled nervously in the pockets of his disreputable coat.

“Hadn’t you an overcoat?” asked Irralie, calmly.

“Yes, yes! I had!”

“Then they may be in that.”

“They were—now I think of it. But I have lost the overcoat. I—I must have left it behind me when my horse knocked up!”

“Then think no more about it,” said Villiers, instantly. “It’ll be as safe in one of these paddocks as on your own back; it’s only a question of knowing where to look for it, and that we can do at our leisure to-morrow morning.”

So there the subject dropped; but it was something more than fortunate that not one of the younger men was present; for—in fact—the three of them were engaged already, in the tutor’s school-room, upon a systematic mutilation of the new owner’s character and pretensions.

“So now, George,” said Jevons, “the

joker we've heard so much about has come and been seen ; but I'm jolly well hanged if he has conquered ! These native English are an almighty rum race ! ”

“ I'll race him,” said George Young venomously. “ And I'm bled if I come in second ! ”

The creature had driven in with Irralie Villiers. As yet this was his rankest offence in the nostrils of good George Young.

“ I don't care what you fellows say,” cried the fuming tutor. “ That brute's not what he says he is. I've been at school with 'em, and I know ! ”

Jevons winked at Young.

“ We know that school, eh, George ? We've heard it before. We'll hear of it again ; but, my faith, we'll hear a little less of the home-brewed, full-grown Englishman after this ! ”

“ Come outside ! ” roared the tutor in a frenzy.

“ What are you givin' us ? ”

“ Come behind the pines and take off your

coat. I don't care whether you hide me or whether you don't ! I know you're the better man, but I'm not going to sit still and hear you talk like that ! ”

He flung open the school-room door, which looked upon a plantation of young pines, and allowed a flood of moonlight to fall upon the floor. At the same moment a couple passed the opening, walking side by side, and in striking silhouette against the moonlit trees.

“ My faith ! ” said Jevons, softly.

“ Who was it ? ” cried George Young, bounding to his feet. “ Not Irralie and that—— ”

“ Unrepresentative new chum ? ” said Jevons, with a laugh. “ So help me never, old man, but it was ! ”

And the fight fell through after all.

CHAPTER III

THE BROKEN COLUMN

The plantation of pines formed three sides of the station yard, which, indeed, suggested a clearing on the edge of a natural forest rather than a single acre left exactly as it was found. The square was completed by the first and foremost of the homestead buildings: a long, regular structure, framed in the customary veranda, but containing (what was less conventional) the family quarters and the station store beneath one vast, white, corrugated roof. Other offices had buildings to themselves, such as the kitchen and the cook's room, the school-room and those of the three young men, wash-house and dairy, iron-store and blacksmith's forge. All these stood in hollow square, looking inward on the yard. And

with the moon shining like a tempered sun on every roof, and the pine-trees whispering on all sides but one, there were worse tasks than learning the names of things from the mouth of Irralie Villiers.

“ But if I *am* to show you the ropes,” said the girl, “ I may as well show you the lot. The stables are quite separate. The stock - yards are farther still. Would you care to see them to-night ? ”

He cared considerably, and appeared to find refreshment in the freedom of the situation. The father had gone into the store to write a letter for the outgoing mail ; the mother had beaten a retreat earlier than usual after the burden and surprises of the day. The stranger and the girl were left to their own devices, without a hint of vulgar espionage in the name of a too self-conscious propriety. The stables were inspected. A handful of oats was taken to the night-horse in the yard. The men’s hut was pointed out on rising ground still farther from the house ; also a natural lawn - tennis court,

marked out in a clay-pan ; and here Irralie descried a racket which had been left out, and picked it up.

“ So you actually play lawn - tennis up here ! ” exclaimed the owner.

“ Actually ! ” repeated Irralie, with fine scorn. “ Goodness ! do you think we are so far behind you as all that ? ”

He laughed. “ I beg your pardon, Miss Villiers. Still, your rackets are behind us— just a season or so.”

“ What do you mean ? ”

“ That one is bent. They are now made straight as a die ! ”

“ I don't believe you,” cried Irralie, warmly ; and the argument ensuing was lively to the last degree. It ended, however, in laughter, swiftly followed by some consideration on the girl's part that cut her laughter short. It was as if she had suddenly found herself in church or in the presence of death. She stood quite still in the moonlight, and looked him very thoroughly up and down.

“ You have lived here always ? ” he said

at length, as if unconscious of her inquisitive gaze. She withdrew it by an effort.

“I wish we had ! No ; most of us were born in Tasmania ; and that’s a lovely country, far better than this, though personally I prefer the back-blocks. There’s room for you to turn round up here ! ”

“I wonder what you would think of England.”

•

“Not much ! I should spend my time on St. Paul’s Cathedral — throwing stones into the sea ! Follow me, Mr. Fullarton, there’s something else I want to show you before we go in ; and we can get back this way.”

She led him to a fence, squeezed through the wires, and crossed an open space dividing them from the fringe of the same plantation which extended to the house. This space was the width of a race-course, and struck the stranger as being planted with innumerable scarecrows shorn of their last rag. He asked what they were, and Irralie answered, “Our spare rooms.”

"Your *what*?"

"Our spare rooms for Monday night. On Monday you will see this strip turned into a street of tents; these are the poles. When you go to a dance in the bush you stay the night. And the ladies take up all the rooms; and all the men camp out."

"I see," said the other; and he followed Irralie's lead among the pines.

"You aren't exactly keen about our party!" cried the girl, over her shoulder.

"Can't you dance?"

"Not much."

"I thought not! But there is something else?"

"Yes; there are my clothes."

"I understood they were coming tomorrow?"

"Well, I expect them, certainly."

"*I wonder if you do!*"

And with the words the girl wheeled round and boldly regarded him by the light of the moon.

"Really, Miss Villiers, you take my

breath away. Why should you doubt my word ? ”

He laughed, but he had colored first.

“ Because I can’t help it ! ” replied the girl, with a little gasp which she would have given her few possessions to prevent.

“ Be frank with me, Miss Villiers. Tell me candidly what it is that makes you suspect me of—of whatever you do suspect ? ”

She shook her head ; she would not or she could not speak ; but her fine, unfaltering eyes never left his nor relaxed for one instant their soul-searching scrutiny.

“ Was it about those papers ? ” pursued the other.

“ That—for one thing.”

“ I see. You think I never had them at all ! ”

“ I think you never would have thought of a lost overcoat if I hadn’t put the words into your mouth ! ”

There was a pause ; and the man’s face showed, as plainly as rent sail or splintered spar, that the shot had gone home.

"Why did you do it?" he cried unwarily.

"You may well ask! Goodness knows—not I!"

"But I *have* lost a coat," he added, vehemently, perceiving his mistake. "I give you my word I lost one to-day; and those papers were in it as certainly as that moon is in the sky. You may believe or doubt it as you like. It is the case, and you will know it by and by. What else is there suspicious about me?"

Evidently he had forgotten his revolver; but Irralie knew that it was in his pocket still, though she did not intend to remind him of that. His tone was both angry and injured, but the injury appealed to her more than the anger. It destroyed her self-confidence, and, in doing so, restored some confidence in him. Then she recalled her earliest prejudicial observation, and smiled at her momentary misgivings.

"There was your horse!" said she—and saw him wince at the word.

“What about my horse?”

“It had come farther than you said; it had gone longer without water. A horse can go twice as long as a man; yet you were only thirsty, but your horse was hollow as a drum and nearly dead!”

For some moments he either could not or would not face her eyes; when once more he did so it was with a recovered calm, and something more than his former urbanity of speech.

“Will you then kindly tell me what you think?”

“I cannot!” cried the girl. “I think one thing one moment and another thing the next. I give you up; but as I had never any right to attempt to unriddle you, I also beg your pardon. Consider unsaid every word I’ve spoken; and forgive me if you can.”

He laughed aloud.

“Forgive you, Miss Villiers! That’s taking it a little too seriously, I am sure. But—the fact is—you are right! And upon

my word I've a good mind to tell you everything on the spot ! ”

Irralie looked in the handsome, reckless face, and involuntarily drew back. “ You must do as you please,” she said.

“ I could trust you? Yes, yes, I could trust you with my life. *You* are not the one to give a fellow away ! ”

“ I hope not. But that would depend.”

“ That—would—depend,” he repeated slowly. “ On the nature of the confidence, of course ! Well, well, let it rest. There was something else you were going to show me before we went in ? ”

“ There was,” said the girl. “ Come this way ; it's something that I think is certain to appeal to you.”

And once more she led him through the moonlit pines, with a heart in chaos, and thoughts so tangled that unravelment seemed as distant as the day of doom. This much she knew : there was a loaded pistol in his pocket, and the crackling of each twig was like the cocking of the hammer behind her

back. And, again, this much she knew even better : that she would have felt no safer out shooting with her father than here and now under the eye of this privily armed man.

So she led him through the soft sand between pine and hop-bush ; and the moon peeped over one shoulder now, and now the other, until at last it shone with startling brilliance on white palings, and on a granite column in the midst of them, broken as a tree by the wind.

"A grave !" said Irralie's companion. But the girl said nothing. And when she looked at him his head was bare.

Indeed the unexpectedness of the spot and its memorial compelled an unpremeditated awe ; nor could a stranger or a sweeter place have been chosen for the repose of human ashes. Homestead and outbuildings were alike beyond sight and sound. Here was no music but that of the constant cricket and the wind among the trees ; and here, for days or for weeks together, no eyes save those of heaven itself. Companion of a thousand

piners, yet still with a stillness which exaggerated their every sound and motion, stood the painted palings, the simply storied pedestal, the granite column snapped like a mast. And the spirit of the sepulchre, which all who came there must feel, was one unattainable in sunlit, sweet-smelling cemetery or cool cathedral crypt. It brought the living nearer to the dead; it left the dead more convincingly at peace and rest for ever.

Still bare-headed, the man crept forward and read—

S A C R E D

TO

THE MEMORY OF

CECIL GORTON GILES,

BORN AT HAMPSTEAD, LONDON,

May 15th, 1853,

DIED AT ARRAN DOWNS, N.S.W.,

January 4th, 1875.

“How sad!” murmured Fullarton. “I know of nothing in life like the pity of a

young fellow cut off in all his sins and all his joy. And suddenly, too ! I think this is the most touching tomb I have ever seen. Who was he ; and how did it happen ? ”

Irralie was watching him with keen eyes.

“ It was before our time,” she said ; “ but he was a young fellow almost straight from his public school, like Mr. Hodding ; only he came up here as storekeeper. His people had the memorial sent up from Melbourne. But it was by his own request that he was buried here ; he lived some hours after it happened.”

“ But what *did* happen ? ”

“ A bushranger shot him through the lungs.”

He looked at her sharply ; she was more than looking at him. Without a word he signified his readiness to return to the house ; without a word she led the way.

CHAPTER IV

NIGHT AND DAY

This was one of Irralie's bad nights. Like most strong characters, the girl had her complement of unexpected weaknesses, and one of these was an irritating inability to sleep in the least difficulty or the smallest vexation of the spirit. Another and a weaker trait was a certain tendency of Irralie's to meet the vexations half-way and to double the difficulties; but this was less generally known; for an unruly imagination was balanced by a reserve almost stoical, and yet little suspected by those who knew only the high-spirited outward girl.

Imagination and reserve were, indeed, characteristics of a nature otherwise breezily courageous and independent to a fault. They were the two quarrelsome elements in

a harmonious whole. And not for the first time did they pray upon each other to-night and tear the heart of Irralie in two between them.

She imagined, or suspected, so much ; and was so ashamed of her suspicions, or imaginations, that she would sooner have died than betray a word of them to living soul. So she reasoned with herself through the long slow hours, and would prove her visions baseless, only to see them plainer than ever for her pains.

Here was the humor of it. The man was not the man he represented himself to be. Very well ; then he must have an object for his imposture ; and what possible object could there be ? Exposure must follow soon or late, and if robbery were the design, how could impersonation expedite that ? Plain robbery was easy enough in the bush, when there was anything to rob ; but what was there here ? Gold escorts were one thing, sheep stations another. And a drove of pure merinos were surely an unwieldy

equivalent for a few handfuls of yellow dust.

Again, if it was a case of impersonation, what had become of the impersonated? He must be somewhere—then where? Irralie thought of novels that she had read with plots founded upon this idea; at the bottom of most there was a murder; but murder was the one suspicion which did *not* plague her on the head of the real or *soi-disant* Greville Fullarton.

Yet again: in such a case there would be reasonable precautions on the villain's part; but this villain took none. He showed his weapons, and he came just as he was, in his rough bushman's clothes, and with his candid, impudent, dare-devil smile. And at the conjured portrait the girl smiled too, for could a calculating desperado look like that? But the smile froze; for could a man who looked like that be the real owner, and an Earl's son?

No; there was something sinister and wrong and underhand; moreover, the man

had nearly confessed to her what it was. He had been within an ace of throwing himself upon her mercy! Well, she was thankful he had not done that. Her suspicions she might keep to herself, but not the guilty confidences of the most attractive villain unhung. On the contrary, if she once knew him for that—well, then she would know also how to act.

And yet—and yet—had she not taken his part—taken it actively—already? Instinctively she had kept to herself his possession of arms; instinctively also she had come to his aid with the ready suggestion of a lost overcoat. And what did these instincts mean? She was a girl who looked things in the face; did they mean his innocence or her own infatuation? In an instant she was out of bed, and kneeling in the moonlight, and praying with all her soul that it might be the innocence of the man which alone put her on his side without her will. For she forgot to allow for a certain large, unreasonable chivalry in herself, ever likely to

create in her a wilful sympathy with the unorthodox and the ungodly ; more probably, however, she was unaware of the growth in her heart of this particular weed of original wickedness.

Morning came, and with it a few minutes of fevered sleep ; but the girl's dreams were worse than her waking imaginations ; they had the added terror of vagueness ; and she fled, rather than rose, from her bed. The outer veranda, whereon her room opened, was as still and private as her room itself. From it she saw the red Riverina dawn, across a sea of sand flecked with sage-green salt-bush ; and the touch of the dawn upon her face and feet gave her new strength and a first surcease from her shameful suspicions.

And shameful was no word for them a little later, when cold water and clean sunshine had done their work, and the station day had begun with all its immemorial humdrum regularity. It was a Sunday, and the girl knew it by all the old, unmistakable signs.

On Sundays her young brothers ran up the horses; she heard their spurs in the veranda, their voices thick with biscuit, and finally their ponies cantering toward the horse-paddock gate. Irralie had then just shut her door; and when next she opened it the boys were returning with the drove of horses in a cloud of sand. The thunder of their hoofs was like the charge of cavalry, with stock-whips cracking for musketry. Nor was it possible to see and hear it for the thousandth time and to harbor one moment longer the preposterous notions of the night.

She walked round the house. The Chinaman was smoking his early morning pipe and bringing wood from the wood-heap for the kitchen fire. Irralie was greeted on every hand with the reassurance of the normal and the unromantic. A couple of chairs stood side by side on the veranda, an empty glass within reach of either. It was as though Irralie had seen her father and the owner drain and rise and part for the night

at the latter's door. A little after she had occasion to pass the door herself, when she heard the owner whistling as he dressed. And a little later yet she met her father in his Sunday suit. Irralie kissed him, but left her palms upon his shoulders, and searched him with a smile that made him wonder what was coming.

"Well, father, what do you think of our friend?"

"Fullarton?"

"Yes."

"A very excellent fellow," declared the manager, with a conviction that brought a thankful flush to the girl's face. "We sat up quite late, and I haven't enjoyed a chat so much for a long time. But, mind you"—and he lowered his voice—"the man's no more like an Earl's son than you or I."

"How do you mean?" asked Irralie, paling in a moment. Luckily she was dealing with no close observer; indeed, this very thought contributed to her pallor: here was also the least suspicious of men.

“How do I mean?” he said. “Well, it’s a bit difficult to explain; I like him, and all that, much better than I expected; but then I expected a lot of gloss, and this fellow has less than none. It’s all the jollier—only somehow it doesn’t seem quite the thing. Look at his clothes, for instance!”

“He must have picked them up from some tramp and put them on for a joke,” said Irralie on the spur. “But I’m glad you like him—and here he is!”

And there he was: in clothes which fitted him uncommonly well to have been picked up in the way suggested, but which looked worse than ever in the full glare of day. He was also unshaven, and a grimy blue from ear to ear; the gross effect, in the words of Mr. Villiers, was decidedly not “quite the thing.”

Irralie returned a formal greeting and slipped away; her heart was once more throbbing with the black doubts of the night; and this time it was slower stilled. Her father and Fullarton drove off after

breakfast to look for the lost overcoat. They returned before lunch without it; nor was Irralie surprised. She had known exactly what to expect; and anticipated with confidence the like result of a cognate quest, undertaken by the store-keeper, who had gone with the spring-cart to meet the mail and to bring back the new owner's luggage.

"I only hope it's there," he said to her, with deep meaning.

"I only hope so too!" she replied, with a deeper yet.

"Then in ten minutes you won't know me: I shall be shaved and clothed and in my right mind."

"You are certainly not in it now."

"Indeed?"

"Or you would never tempt Providence as you are doing!"

And the girl turned on her heel, loathing herself for the unpremeditated warning, and him for the inexplicable attraction which compelled the words in her own despite. Then for Irralie it was the night all over

again — with its suspicions, doubts, arguments, lapses of involuntary introspection, and agonies of acute self-contempt. Only now she could wander and rend her spirit in the open air ; she was no longer imprisoned in the dark between burning sheets. The scent of the pines was in her nostrils, the shadows of the pines striped and fluted the whiteness of her cool attire ; and to look at her, with bent head and red sunshade and raven hair, her maiden meditations, if not fancy-free, might have been guaranteed free as a child's from grave concern. Yet there was mischief in her feet as in her mind. It led her to the broken column and the lonely grave ; and there it held her, still with thought, and gazing at the inscription with eyes that read not ; nor ever moving till a breaking twig broke also the spell that bound the girl.

CHAPTER V

AN ACCIDENT

Irralie started. But the step was not Fullarton's. And the two-edged stab of disappointment and relief, instantly experienced by the girl, alarmed her later when she found time to think of it. At the moment, however, there was George Young—for he it was—to be faced and fenced with; and one glance at his heavy, wholesome face discovered it alight with unmistakable news.

“Well?” cried Irralie, and held her breath with the monosyllable. The luggage, like the overcoat, had not been found! The impostor was already exposed! That must be the news; what else?

The overseer looked from Irralie to the inscription at the base of the column, and

again significantly at the girl. Irralie could have struck him for the delay.

“What’s the matter with you? Why don’t you speak?” she gasped. “Something has happened—and there you stand!”

“Oh, it’s nothing near home, Miss Villiers; only I was just thinking, seeing the name of poor Giles there, that there may be one or two more to join him before long!”

“What do you mean?”

“Bushrangers!” replied the other. “Our friend Stingaree at it again!”

“Here?” she steeled herself to say.

“Well, no; not on the run; but somewhere or other in these back-blocks, there is little doubt. You see, Jevons has just come back with the mail—and those portmanteaus——”

“*Has* he brought the portmanteaus?”

She steadied herself by one of the wooden palings round the grave.

“Oh, yes, he’s brought *them* all right; it was about that I came to you; but this bit of news is the thing that’s made us all

sit up! Not that he's likely to come here, Miss Villiers," continued the overseer reassuringly, to unheeding ears. "Stingaree never stuck up a station in his life. Gold-escorts are *his* lay; he goes where money is; still, yesterday morning it seems he stuck up a bush pub by way of a change. I suppose there was money there. I know the shanty—it's over in the Balranald district—that is straight across country from here, say seventy miles by the crow. And that's far enough — across country. It would be a different thing if it were north or south of us, anywhere up or down this stock-route. Still—it's near enough to be exciting!"

Of all this Irralie had heard two sentences exactly. So not a soul save herself had suspected him here! And now—it seemed incredible—the portmanteaus had actually come, and even ~~she~~ she could suspect nothing more. So ran her thoughts, and the overseer's voice was as the babble of a creek.

“It was about that you came to me?” she repeated after him, when he had done, as though the words had been his last. They were the last that she remembered.

“About — ah, that luggage!” said George Young. He paused; and in his change of expression Irralie’s quickened eyes perceived an enemy of Greville Fullarton, and found herself wondering what the enemy would have given for her late suspicions. “That luggage,” he continued, in a tone changed like his face, “is more bother than it’s worth. It’s great, big, heavy, regular new chum’s baggage, and was bother enough to fetch. And now he’s got it he can’t get into it! Lost every blessed key!”

“Lost—every—key!” repeated Irralie, in a voice that must have flashed her own idea through a brain less slow than that of the overseer, who, however, bore it in mind. It was an idea that made Irralie tremble for one moment—freeze the next; and so remain, with proud, white face and flashing eye.

“They said you might have one that

would fit," pursued Young; "and they asked me to go and look for you."

"Who asked you?"

"Fullarton himself."

"It was like his impertinence!"

"It was so! I'm glad to hear you say that, for in *my* opinion a more——"

"That'll do," replied Irralie, tartly.

"Don't hang a man before you try him!" And with a sudden, feverish haste, she led the way homeward through the pines; the overseer following, with a very healthy craving for the new owner's blood.

On the veranda, sure enough, were the portmanteaus, hat - box, gun - case, and dressing - bag of a sufficiently new chum. The labels of the voyage still adhered to the raw, unseasoned leather. Indeed, with the single exception of the gun-case, everything was flagrantly new and redolent of the London outfitter. And on the largest piece of all, the careless centre of a keenly interested group, sat a picturesque, unshaven adventurer, like a beggar enthroned.

"You are my last hope, Miss Villiers," said he, as the girl came up. "I've tried all the keys on the premises but yours. If you fail me——"

"I shall fail you," said Irralie. "I keep nothing in the world under lock and key."

"Indeed! Then I am done."

"I am afraid you are."

The words were said in a way that attracted no third person's attention. Yet Fullarton winced as his eyes met Irralie's—winced, and then smiled. Next moment he was holding out his hand to one of her young brothers.

"That knife of yours," said he.

"To force the lock?"

Fullarton took the knife without replying, opened the big blade, got lazily to his feet, and as lazily reseated himself, cross-legged, on the veranda-boards, within reach of the brass and leather fastenings. The circle of inquisitive faces had closed in upon him when he paused to search it for the face of Irralie. All he saw was her black hair vanishing.

“ Don't go away, Miss Villiers ! ”

“ Why not—Mr. Fullarton ? ”

“ Because I've got something in here that I want you to see. You remember our little discussion about lawn-tennis rackets ? You said they were still made curved, and I said they weren't. Well, on the lower side of this portmanteau—at the very bottom—underneath my shirts—there is, or ought to be, a racket of this year. We'll see if there is, Miss Villiers ; and we'll see which of us is right.”

He had spoken with smiling eyes upon the girl ; and his smile broadened as he specified, with more and more exactitude, the precise position of the racket. It was the address of a conjurer before his greatest trick ; yet Irralie alone understood. As he finished speaking, he raised the knife and stabbed with sudden energy at the leather above the lock. Indeed the point of the blade caught the plate of brass, and the blade itself closed upon his hand amid the exclamations of the onlookers.

“You’ll ruin it!” cried one or two, meaning the portmanteau.

“He’s cut himself,” said another.

But Fullarton doubled his fist before the blood had time to flow. “It’s nothing!” he muttered, and, with his left hand, cut the straps, sawed round the lock, and had the portmanteau open in an instant. In another, the shirts were displayed and disarranged, and the lawn-tennis racket duly produced.

“As straight as my face, I think!” said Fullarton, as he held it out to Irralie. She hardly looked at it. But, from her place among the others, she did look at Fullarton—humbly, steadfastly—with an expression which he alone could read. To the rest there had merely been a friendly argument, and Irralie was merely in the wrong. Yet to the more observant there was an unprecedented absence of humor, and of spirit in Irralie’s acknowledgment of the fact.

“You are right,” she said, as if it were

quite a tragic matter. "You are right, and I was a perfect fool! Forgive me if you ever can."

"On one condition. The racket is yours. I have more than I can use."

She then took it from him, but no thanks would come. A "perfect fool" indeed, the depth of her folly—the knowledge that he had plumbed it—and the good-humored tact of his reproof, all struck home together and choked her with simple shame. She made one effort; another, and she would have broken down; but she was saved, and strangely, at that moment.

"Mr. Fullarton!" she heard her father cry. "Your hand! your hand!"

Fullarton looked; the blood was welling through his clenched fingers. He turned his back and examined the cut.

"Deeper than I thought!" he muttered to the manager. "Have you any gut in the medicine-chest? That's an artery pumping. Gut and tweezers and a basin of water in the dining-room!"

And in the dining-room he sat with his bare arm over a basin of reddening water, and, using the tweezers with his own left hand, picked up the arteries himself and called for somebody to tie them with the gut. The manager tried, but his fingers were all hard thumbs; he was only good for standing by with the whiskey, which was needed but refused. Mrs. Villiers was too nervous; and it was Irralie herself who finally tied the arteries with her firm, nimble fingers, and who helped to bind up the hand. The young men and the boys looked on; and, when all was over, there was but one heart left for the wounded man to win, who reeled when he rose, and had to be supported to his room. The boys gave him a rousing cheer, led by their frenzied tutor; and it was none other than Jevons who cried, "One more!"

But Irralie shut herself in her room, clasped her hands stained with his blood, and went in thankfulness upon her knees. Her doubts were at an end; yet, in the first ec-

stasy of secret and spiritual deliverance, they seemed less preposterous than at any previous stage. The horror had been too strong for her to cease to take it seriously the moment it was removed.

CHAPTER VI

TWO VOICES

The Fourth Commandment was not totally broken at Arran Downs ; it was merely observed in a modified form. The family remembered the Sabbath-night, if not the day, and kept it holy in a rather winning way of their own. The piano was wheeled into the broad veranda, forms were put across, and lanterns hung. Then the station bell would ring for five minutes, and the men would troop over from the hut, slipping hot pipes into their pockets as they entered the veranda. Mr. Villiers would be discovered sitting at a small table with the books. The men, too, remained seated during the entire service.

This was never long. A few prayers were read, then a chapter, then something pithy from a book. It was not always a sermon

so-called. But there were always hymns, and Irralie was never absent from the piano. She was certainly not a good performer; but she could play a hymn, and lead it, too, with a voice not free from possibilities. She was also a great favorite with the men.

On the night of the knife accident, however, the men's hut sent a contingent without numerical precedent. And the attraction, of course, was the new chum-owner with the blooming handle to his blooming name. Such of the men, indeed, as had already seen him, described the hut as the "proper blooming place for 'im—if you jokers could suffer the cove." Others, who had yet to behold him at short range, and who came to service for that purpose alone, were punished by a complete take-in.

"That the cove?" said one. "Why, 'e's a bloomin' toff like all the rest o' them new chummies. Wot were yer givin' us?"

"Blowed if he hasn't been and dressed himself up! Hardly knew him myself; looks a fine chap now, eh, don't 'e?"

“Plucky fine! Wot’s ’e done with ’is
,and?”

And so forth—under cover of the first hymn. For Fullarton had been helped into a well-cut suit of light gray flannel. He now wore also an impeccable colored shirt, a white collar, and a good tie badly tied by Hodding, the tutor, who had also essayed an easy shave, and achieved an easier than Fullarton anticipated. The net result was a change astonishing enough, if essentially superficial. To be sure, too, a sleeve hung loose, which prevented the coat from fitting as a coat should. Still, the garments were by the most celebrated of all firms, as Hodding told Jevons (who had never heard of that firm) with bated breath. And, without a doubt, pale as he was from loss of blood, the handsome, headlong scapegrace looked no longer a son of whom the noblest Earl need have felt very sorely ashamed.

So thought Irralie on the piano-stool before her duties obliged her to turn her back. This occurred at the first hymn, of which the

very first verse had an instantaneously depressing effect upon the girl. Not that it was a hymn she disliked ; it was " Onward, Christian Soldiers," which she loved and had chosen. But here was a new, hoarse voice braying out of tune in her ear, and she was only too well aware whose voice it was. Anything more painful, anything so raucous, ear-splitting, and grotesque, Irralie had never heard. It stabbed her nerves like the squeak of a slate-pencil. It was no more certain of a note than a drunken man of his steps. And it came from lips which Irralie had so recently suspected of falsehood and deceit, that, but for the incident of the tennis-racket, her new-born faith had been once more shaken to its base.

As it was she found herself disillusioned and disappointed in the hour of relief. And the most mortifying moment of all was when, in the second hymn, the infliction suddenly ceased, and the honest, painstaking, sure-footed bass of George Young (which it had drowned) was heard for the

first time coming down like a steam-hammer on every note.

Irralie was provoked beyond rhyme or reason. She had made up her mind to think so very well now of the man of whom—on grounds disgracefully slight—she had thought so very, very badly. And it was a fair mind, anxious to do justice always, and to make prompt amends where it failed; but here was this miserable little fly of a voice in the ointment of her new content.

Yet it might have been worse; earlier in the day, at least, she would have thought more of it. For if there was such a thing as a typical bush-ranging bellow, Irralie would then have made certain that she had heard it to-night. As it was, however, when the second hymn had been sung without further atrocities, the girl turned round on her music-stool and revived her spirits by side-long glances at the empty, well-cut sleeve.

“I must apologize for making that row,” he said to her, under cover of the men’s stampede. “I’m sorry I sang.”

"Why?" asked Irralie, coloring.

"I saw your shoulders up to your ears. I seemed to hear your teeth on edge! And suddenly I remembered what they all used to say at home. My father's a clergyman, you know; he used to like us all to join in; but my brothers and sisters petitioned him to forbid me to!"

"It was really quite unconscious on my part," said Irralie. "I—I never heard anything."

The other laughed.

"Your friend Young sings well," said he.

"Too well!" said Irralie, who felt vaguely annoyed at having poor George styled her friend—by Fullarton. Nor did she like the singer any better for being one just then. But Fullarton only laughed.

"Too well, Miss Villiers!"

"There's no interest in being so good and doing things perfectly."

"He is a very good fellow, then, this George Young? I thought he looked it."

“Offensively good!” said Irralie, and changed the subject with characteristic abruptness.

In fact, she had remembered Fullarton’s wound, and the memory expressed itself in that solicitude for him which was to be her outward way of atoning for the folly that was still heinous in her eyes. She had wronged him before, she must make up for it now. So seriously she continued to put it to herself; and yet her friends did not know her as a serious person, but rather for a hearty, hard-riding, impudent, charming, independent child of the bush.

Was she changing? Had she already changed? Deliberate introspection would have come amiss to her the week, nay, the very day before; hitherto she had coupled it with insomnia (to which hers had been always due) as an occasional disorder at the worst. Now—as it were in a moment—it was her perpetual pitfall—a besetting sin. This very reflection she made alone in the moonlight later in the evening. And why

alone? To think about herself—for no other reason, unless it was to think——

An unreasoning anger filled the heart of the girl. She looked about for one on whom to vent it, and was given George Young, who at that moment stepped down from the veranda and was proceeding with bent head toward the young men's rooms. His very carriage was an offence; but his excellent singing that night had been a greater. Irralie determined to be even with him on the spot. He was the only one who had never said a word about the wounded hand. That was another thing; she would ask him what it all meant. And yet — she might have known. George Young was a friend of some few years' standing. He could remember her short dresses and her black pigtail. But Greville Fullarton was the acquaintance of a single day.

“George!” cried Irralie, authoritatively. “Who has frightened you?” she scornfully added, as he came up staring.

“ You astonished me.”

“ How ? ”

“ By calling me like that.”

“ Oh, so I haven’t known you long enough to call you George, eh? Certainly we live and learn ! ”

“ You know I didn’t mean that, Irralie.”

She did know, and she relented. “ Then what’s the matter with you? What have I done — or anybody else — that you should look as you have looked all the evening, and — and not behave like other people? Who’s offended you? That’s what I want to know ! ”

Nobody. He was not offended at all. That was all he would say. Yet he said it with such a tragic tremor, and was at one and the same time so dignified and manly and pig-headed, that Irralie could not leave ill alone, but must needs answer for him.

“ I know who ! ” she whispered, and pointed across the yard to the front veranda. It showed a firmament of tiny red stars. The new owner had got at his

cigars ; and Young alone had professed to prefer his own pipe.

Young made no answer now.

“ You hate him ! ” pursued Irralie, in a low, excited voice. “ Why should you ? How do you dare ? ”

“ Dare ! ” said the other softly.

No retort could have stung Irralie more.

“ Then presume,” she said. “ Yes, presume is the better word for you. You do presume when you take a scunner against a man you know nothing about ! ”

“ A man I know nothing about ! That’s it—exactly.”

He turned, and walked toward the pines. She followed him until their ordinary voices were out of earshot of the veranda. At the wire fence they stopped, and Irralie turned upon him with subdued fury.

“ At all events you know who he is ! ”

“ Who is he ? ”

“ You know as well as I do that he’s the son of an Earl—Lord Fullarton ! ”

For one moment she thought his smile a

sneer at her glibness with the titles; the next, she divined a yet more sinister meaning, and it held her speechless. Her suspicions of last night were his of this! It was incredible, monstrous, absurd; and yet the case. His silence was significant—and the more shame for him! It had been bad enough in her when there were the rough clothes to excite a prejudice, and no luggage to allay it. But in George Young—now—after all that had happened under his eyes—it was mere malicious idiocy. Irralie laughed in his face.

“So you think that!”

“What?”

“That he’s not what he says he is!”

Young looked at her firmly with his obstinate, set face.

“Yes—I think that. Stop a moment, Irralie! You have forced me to speak, and now there’s one question—no, two—that I’ve got for you. Have you ever seen the signature of Greville Fullarton?”

“Never.”

"Then I have. There's his note to your father still lying about the store. Have you ever seen the signature of the man who turned up last night?"

"No, I haven't."

"Nor will you ever!" said Young, emphatically.

"Why not? What are you driving at?"

"He has injured his right hand!"

His meaning was slow to dawn upon her; yet some vague sense of it was already troubling her heart.

"Well?" she said. "What then? It was a most unfortunate accident."

"I don't agree with you. On the contrary, if you ask me, I should call it a very happy accident indeed! There are more documents in the air than those he professes to have lost. Some had come up by the mail. And your father had asked him to sign them!"

There was a pause.

"I see: so you don't think it was an accident at all," said Irralie, with the stinging contempt of sudden and complete self-control.

“No, I do not.”

And he faced her doggedly as with insolent scorn she turned lightly from him, retreated a few steps, and turned again.

“And pray how do you account for the racket in the portmanteau? You were there, I think? You know what I mean?”

“Yes, I was there. The explanation of that is fairly simple, too.”

“Give it me!” she cried, stamping her foot.

“No, I shall not,” he replied quietly.
“I shall do nothing of the kind.”

“For obvious reasons!” sneered the girl; “for reasons that are so worthy of you! Ingenious is not the word for your theory—nor for you—nor for every single thing you’ve said to-night! I leave the word to your imagination. But it only needed this to complete my opinion—of you!”

And so she left him—with a sudden catch at her skirt, as though the very sand he stood in were malignant ground.

CHAPTER VII

THE SKELETON AT THE DANCE

The affair of the following evening was evidently far from proving the formidable rite which Fullarton had appeared to dread. He took a mild interest in the preparations, and made a favorable impression upon the guests. Active help he certainly could not give; but Irralie felt that he would have been of but little use in any case; and sadly admitted to herself (though not to another soul) that her friend was not and could never have been a dancing man. She felt it only less than his dreadful singing. But there were no more absurd suspicions. He was with her all the day; and if he had not a single suggestion for the floor, or for the arrangement of chairs and lights, he had plenty to tell Irralie about Harrow, Oxford, and California. He had been superan-

nuated from the first, sent down from the second, and had bade the last farewell in a red shirt and no boots. Luckily the overseer was out of the way. He was superintending the pitching of the tents. Irralie and he had not spoken again.

As for the guests, they arrived between noon and sundown in some dozen buggies, which for lack of stable-room were arranged in a sort of laager near the tents. The Brownes of Quandong drove over four-in-hand; and there were several young men who rode with their dress-clothes in valises at the saddle-bow. Finally, some forty persons sat down to an early dinner in the back veranda, and thereafter retired to their rooms and tents to dress.

They reappeared upon a delightful scene. The southern day had ended with its usual abruptness; the rising moon had already cleared the pines. The main building wore a necklace of Chinese lanterns hung by Irralie between the veranda posts, and the symmetry of this was well relieved by the

purely random lighting of the yard. The gross effect, however, would have been better, undoubtedly, without a moon; as it was, by ten o'clock the night was lighter than many a northern day.

About this hour two things happened. The new owner, then making himself most attentive to Mrs. Browne of Quandong (whose diamonds were worthy of Park Lane), felt a tug at his armless sleeve. He turned his head, and there was Irralie. The girl was dressed in white, trimmed (by her own hands) with rowan-berries; there were more berries in her hair; and earlier in the evening, at all events, health and youth and radiant high spirits had made her beautiful in many eyes. She was now, however, very visibly overheated, for she had been dancing everything with the utmost *abandon*; and she was also, in the judgment of Mrs. Browne of Quandong (who had spent a recent year in England), decidedly "bad form."

"Well, Miss Villiers——"

The new owner was cut short as he rose to give her his chair.

“Don’t Miss Villiers *me* ! I’m far too hot to be reminded I’m all that—or to sit down, thanks all the same. I came to say the next two are ours.”

“Ours?”

“Yes; and you don’t need to look like that, or you’ll make Mrs. Browne more ashamed of me than she is already. Oh, I know you didn’t ask me—I can’t help that! I’m simply too hot to dance another step till I’ve had a good long rest in the cool. And, as I can’t possibly ask the able-bodied to give up their pleasure for me, I appeal to you. Come and get me something to drink, and bring Mrs. Browne as well!”

The face of the lady of Quandong was a study of the first order. It is true that the girl was unfashionably excited, and very likely her speech was all it appeared to Mrs. Browne, who, however, did not know how much of it had been made for her benefit. Nor could she doubt but that her late

aristocratic companion was as deeply disgusted as herself; nor help pitying him as the young minx carried him off. And this was one thing that happened about ten of the clock.

The other was less public; indeed, the horse was not seen till much later, and such as saw the Skeleton among the pines took him probably for an on-looker from the hut. Yet none can have seen him very well, or his dress would have excited immediate remark. He wore riding-breeches beautifully cut, and gaiters of the newest. His eye was garnished with a single glass, and in his hand he carried an English hunting-crop. He found his way through the pines with vigilant, unfamiliar steps, and he surveyed the Chinese lanterns and the flitting faces from the shelter of a well-grown hop-bush. Some were dancing on the veranda itself. The stranger watched them with the half-frown and half-smile of a man who appeared to find the novelty of the sight its most striking feature.

Meantime, Irralie under the moon with the new owner was a very different person from Irralie in the ball-room with Mrs. Browne of Quandong. She was much quieter, and, it is possible, a little less like herself. That unspeakable mistake of hers still rankled in her bosom whenever she found herself in Fullarton's company. She had tried to make amends to him since the accident; but she was not at all sure that she had succeeded; and gradually the wish had grown upon her to speak to him candidly about the whole matter. Rightly or wrongly, her soul was still burdened, and she wished to unburden it; a few words—the fewest possible—and she would breathe more freely in his presence. There are natures that must cry *peccavi* after every realized offence; and Irralie's was one.

So at last she said, "Mr. Fullarton, I have something on my mind, and you know what it is as well as I do. I am ashamed of myself!" For it was characteristic of Irralie that, however long she might be in making

up her mind to say or do a thing, the speech or the action itself was invariably crisp and to the point.

The other halted in his stride.

"Ashamed?" said he. "What in the world about?"

"You know," said Irralie.

"I! Let me think."

"Think back to yesterday."

"Yes?"

"To yesterday afternoon."

"Good. What then?"

"Oh, you don't help me a bit!" cried the girl. "I made a fool of myself. I thought all sorts of idiotic things! I hadn't even the decency to conceal my thoughts from you; you saw them—and behaved handsomely! Yes, you did; you might have given me away before them all; but not you! And I am grateful—more grateful and ashamed than I can ever say. I want to thank you and to apologize with the same stone."

"This is very serious," said Fullarton,

smiling. "Of course, if you say it was as bad as all that, I must take your word for it. But—who on earth did you imagine I was?"

"Stingaree!"

"I thought so! It occurred to me when you showed me that grave in the pines."

"Oh, I was an idiot. It makes me feel hot whenever I think of it; and yet I'm the better for telling you the worst. It was the old clothes and the revolver and all that. Can you *possibly* understand?"

"Easily," said Fullarton, reassuringly. "There's only one thing I can't fathom."

"What's that?"

"Why on earth you didn't promptly tell your people!"

There was a pause. They had entered the plantation, but at its southerly extremity; the stock-yards and out-buildings lying to the north. Very faintly in the distance, they could catch the high notes of the fiddler from Hay, with an occasional chord from the piano. But this was only while Irralie paused.

"I was too ashamed," she said at length. "Besides, I didn't believe it myself—I only couldn't help *thinking* it."

"You might have told them what you couldn't help thinking; or at least let them know that I was armed."

"I might, certainly."

"Why didn't you, Miss Villiers?"

They were now approaching the southerly edge of the homestead clearing. The illuminations shone in their eyes through the thinning trees. The music had ceased; it was not missed, however, in the pines; and thus the rather singular lack of open-air promenaders went also unremarked. Fullerton repeated his question.

"I can't explain it," replied Irralie. "You were one against many; that may have been it. And then, you never looked the villain!"

"Suppose I had!" he said, eagerly. "Suppose you had known me for Stingaree himself; what then?"

Irralie made no reply. They had struck

the fence and found a horse there, tethered. The girl was puzzled.

“ I wonder who has come ? ” said she.

“ Don’t wonder ! Answer my question—please, Miss Villiers ! ”

“ Say it again.”

“ If I had been the brute you thought me, would you—have stood by me even so ? ”

“ No, indeed ! I should think not. How can you ask ? ”

“ I only wanted to know.”

They squeezed through the wires, and had the yard to themselves. And here Irralie was still further mystified. The ball-room windows stood open to the floor ; nobody was dancing, and yet the room was full. The music had ceased, but the sound of a high, drawling voice floated out into the yard.

“ Who’s that talking ? ” said Irralie.

“ It’s a voice I don’t know at all ! ”

She looked at her companion ; and his expression was still puzzling her, when a sudden uproar burst upon them from the open

windows. Men were tumbling pell - mell through them, shouting like lunatics, and armed with native weapons snatched from the walls.

“Stingaree !” they roared. “There he is ! Run, Miss Villiers ; that’s Stingaree !”

Irralie never forgot the wild voices or the wilder scene. As one man they had dashed at her companion. He turned and ran for the tethered horse. The reins were whipped from the fence before he could mount ; but he was first through the wires, when, instead of running on, he wheeled round to reason or remonstrate with his pursuers. Irralie saw his gestures without hearing a word ; but when they cut him short with a roar and a dash, and struck at his head with their spears and boomerangs, she saw the hand become a fist, and the fist planted in the middle of the first shirt - front to breast the wires. Next moment they were scaled by all, and the many fell headlong upon the one.

Again and again he shook and hit and hacked them off; he fought like a wounded tiger; and now he tugged out his injured hand, and began fighting with that. It looked ghastly in the moonlight — big as a boxing-glove with lint and bandages, and white at first, but quickly reddening from within as it struck and struck and struck among the crumpled shirts and loose white ties. Every blow left a smear. But the end came suddenly; the gallant wretch was grasped from behind in deadly grips; a heavy, livid face writhed beside his own, and George Young bore him to the ground.

Irralie turned away her head. The veranda was all red lanterns and white faces and torn trains. But among them was a new face, with drooping whiskers and a single eye-glass; and as Irralie looked a dapper Englishman, in gaiters, riding-breeches, and twinkling spurs, stepped down from the veranda, and strutted over to the fence with his hands in his pockets.

“Gentlemen ! gentlemen ! ” she heard his high voice drawl. “No undue violence, gentlemen, I beg ! ”

And he headed the procession which marched through the yard a few moments later, and in the midst of which, with a face all blood, pallor, and cynical resignation, walked the man who for forty-eight hours had passed unchallenged as the owner of Arran Downs.

CHAPTER VIII

THE HOUR AFTER

They clapped him in the iron-store. And when Irralie had seen the last of him in their hands, she started as one wakes from a dream, and fled before the return-wave of triumphant captors. For the next half-hour she was missing and yet not missed. Then she was wanted for a purpose, and Mrs. Villiers, trying her door, found it locked.

“Irralie! Irralie! Let me in!”

Heavy steps crossed the floor; the key grated; the leaden steps retreated. Mrs. Villiers turned the handle and entered the room. The girl had thrown herself back upon the bed.

“My dear child! What next? I wondered where you were. We are going to have supper.”

“Supper! After that?”

“Why not? We are beginning to feel ourselves again—thanks to Mr. Fullarton—and if we can’t dance we must at all events eat. Nobody is going home. The Brownes talked of it, but Mr. Fullarton dissuaded them. He has such tact! I don’t know what we should have done without him. He has quite won *my* heart; and such a handsome fellow! Irralie, he says he hasn’t seen you yet; that was indeed what sent me to look for you. Come now, and be introduced before supper!”

“No!” cried the girl. “I have had Mr. Fullartons enough.”

“But you will come to supper?”

“Not if you will let me off; and I do so want to be left alone, mother! If the rest of you can forget such a thing, I cannot. I was with him at the time. You were all prepared for it; it took me by surprise.”

Mrs. Villiers had not thought of that. She was a good, ordinary soul, whose affections were superior to her insight; but she did feel with Irralie now.

“ My poor child ! Yes, you were with him at the time. If only I had dreamt ! But you were always with him,” added the mother in sudden alarm. “ It cannot be possible—Irralie—that you ever *liked* him ? ”

“ I did — most certainly,” said Irralie, stoutly. Her forehead was hot to the hand which smoothed her hair back tenderly.

“ You cannot like him now ! ”

“ Now ? I hate him ! ” cried the girl. “ I hate him ! If you knew how he lied—to me ! Nothing could be too bad for him, mother. Did they—— ”

She checked herself.

“ Yes, Irralie ? ”

“ Oh, nothing. I was only wondering whether they did up his hand again.”

“ Yes, at once. Mr. Fullarton saw to it himself.”

“ And is he—behaving himself—in the iron-store ? ”

“ He has never made a sound.”

“ Nor owned up to anything, I suppose ? ”

“ Yes ! He has confessed everything—to Mr. Fullarton while they were binding up his hand. How he first heard of him, and worked the whole plan up—actually sending him a telegram in our name putting him off for a week ! It was a lucky thing that Mr. Fullarton heard down the road that we were expecting him—heard also of the sticking-up of that public-house on Saturday—had his suspicions, and determined to come on. Had he not done so we should all have been robbed and most likely murdered in our beds ! Think of it : a crape mask has been found in the pocket of the dreadful coat he came in, and a pistol in his room ! It is easy to be wise after the event, but how we ever came to be taken in by such a ruffian passes *my* comprehension ; and so it will yours when you see and speak to the real man. Such a charming fellow ! A little supercilious, I heard someone say ; but, mind you, *I* don’t think so. I thought it quite right of him to criticise the floor ! ”

Irralie lay motionless with closed eyes and

inattentive brain. Through the thin walls came the buzz of voices, excited still, but only pleasantly so; for was not the desperado safely secured without having done anything very desperate after all? And for everybody else was it not an adventure to boast of for the term of one's natural life? This was the impression derived by Irralie, rightly or wrongly, from her mother's manner and the voices through the walls. The little incident was over. It was nothing more. They could now sit down to supper—quite possibly with an added zest; but the girl again begged to be excused from joining them.

“Dear mother, yes, I know I am your daughter and the daughter of the house. But I can't help it. You must let me off. It will be understood. I was with him at the time. You all were behind the scenes. Tell them that, and they will understand.”

“I see that it has shaken you,” said Mrs. Villiers, still smoothing the hair from the hot, troubled brow. “And no wonder,

dear Irralie ; yet what can you do in here ? We shall be just outside the door."

" I will slip round to the nursery, and from there to the school-room," said Irralie, rising. " Then after you have gone, I shall come straight to bed. Mother, you are good to me ! You understand ! I was with him. What will people think ? It makes me ache with shame. But you are good ! "

She flung her arms about her mother's neck, and kissed her fondly, but without a tear. Then she was gone. And Mrs. Villiers returned in trouble to the crowded room.

A sudden hush preceded her entry, with which, however, it had nothing to do ; the Englishman had seated himself on the music-stool vacated by the hireling from Hay, and was running his ringed fingers over the keys. A corrugated forehead was the result, followed, however, a moment after, by a performance which, while it lasted, held the listeners spellbound. The style was that

of a master ; the only fault lay in the execution, which was imperfect but yet full of brilliance. Every ear was charmed, and all eyes fascinated by the magic mastery of the white keys by the small, sunburnt hands, scintillating with rings. Yet the whole affair lasted but a minute, and was rudely broken off in the middle of a bar.

“ I really can't stand it any longer,” drawled the musician, rising.

“ Stand what ? ” asked Mr. Villiers, who thought somebody must have been talking, and was prepared to reprimand the offender.

“ Your piano,” replied the other. “ My dear sir, it's painful ! ”

The manager, like many of his friends, was duly taken aback ; but Mrs. Villiers (a woman who venerated rudeness in a man) instantly advanced from the threshold to fill the breach.

“ I *quite* agree with Mr. Fullarton,” said she. “ It is a terrible instrument ; but that was a very beautiful piece ; may I ask what it was ? ”

"That? A little thing by a man called Chopin. A polonaise — if you're any wiser."

"Oh, indeed. How I wish we had a better piano!"

"Ah! I shall have my Erard sent out by the next mail."

And the matter dropped; but another, which made a very similar impression, occurred at supper, on the production of champagne.

"Champagne up here!" cried the Englishman, for once surprised out of his drawl. "Good heavens!"

"We got it up specially from Hay," explained the manager, reddening.

"Hay!"

And the new-comer steadily refused to drink even his own health in anything more perilous than very weak whiskey-and-water; and once more his hostess backed him up.

"Fool of a woman," muttered an old overseer under his breath. "I'd like to give him five minutes with my stock-whip!"

"I agree," whispered the young man next him (who had a red smudge on his collar). "The joker we landed would have had better manners! It makes you sorry. If the great Irralie were here there'd be some fun! I wonder where she is?"

The great Irralie was at that moment in the school-room, in the open doorway, looking out upon the pines.

The moon shone full in her eyes, but discovered neither tears nor the signs of tears, nor aught but indignation and bitter regret. She had suspected everything from the first. And because of her suspicions she had torn her soul—for a hardened villain; and because of her suspicions she had humbled herself to a notorious scoundrel, who had lied to her to the very end. That was what rankled most. He had not trusted her! Yet she did not think it was that at all.

There were two doors to the school-room. The one at which Irralie stood, led without porch or passage into the open air, and from

it she could see no other building. But an inner door opened into a tiny lobby, which let one in or out through a shallow veranda abutting the yard. From this veranda one had all the homestead buildings under one's eye: the kitchen opposite, the long main building to the left, and to the right the blacksmith's forge and the iron-store. The two last were twin structures entirely composed of sheets of corrugated iron either nailed to uprights or clamped together with bolts and nuts. The store was the nearer to the school-room block, and in front of it, with a pipe in his mouth and a repeating-rifle under his arm, stood George Young on guard in the moonlight.

Irralie watched him from the shallow veranda, for which she presently forsook her school-room door. The veranda was in deep shadow, and she stood unobserved within ten paces of Young. His head was bent and his shoulders rounded. He looked a man dejected rather than alert, and the girl wondered whether he was thinking of

the previous night, and of her hard words to him then. To think of them herself meant instantaneous action on the part of Irralie. She had not to think twice, but stepped forward there and then, with her right arm held out in front of her.

“Shake hands—if you will,” she said.
“I don’t deserve it. But try !”

It was done without a word, and the pipe was put away.

“I am honestly sorry for every word I said,” continued Irralie, warmly. “I thought you foolishly and wickedly suspicious, but now we see who was the wicked fool ! Heaven knows I had my own doubts in the beginning. But I let him see it ; he set to work to remove them, and succeeded—you may know how. It was a clever trick, though ; I will say that.” And Irralie sighed.

“You mean about the tennis-racket ?”

“Yes. You said it was simple ?”

“It was the simplest dodge of all, Irralie ! Fullarton stopped in Melbourne to play in a

tournament. It was in all the papers. He was bound to have a racket with him, and that trunk was the only one long enough."

Irralie said nothing; it was as though, in the face of even his self-confessed guilt, she had yet retained a sneaking regard for the one positive point made by the villain in his own favor. She looked at the prison-door. It was corrugated iron like the walls and roof, and heavily padlocked on the outside. They were standing a few yards from it, and talking in undertones. A change of subject was obtained by a request for George Young's opinion of "the real man."

Given with alacrity, this was golden indeed; in fact, in her mother and the overseer Irralie had encountered the only two persons with whom the ill-mannered Englishman had made himself a favorite, though all admired him. And even the enthusiasm of George Young was tempered with one or two admissions.

"He is a masterful man, and a fine general, but certainly a cool hand. For in-

stance, about the men's hut. Haven't you heard? There's not a man up there that has any idea what's happened. We gave them a supper, you know, and they were at it when this thing occurred. Mr. Fullarton had orders given which have resulted in their not getting wind of it yet."

"Orders!" said Irralie, with her black eyebrows arched. "Yes, that *was* cool. And what was the object?"

"To avoid any display of sympathy with Stingaree. There's something in it, too. We have some rough customers up at the hut just now; and it's not at all an uncommon thing to find an ordinary pound-a-week hand ready on principle to back a bushranger for all he's worth. At least, it wasn't in the Kelly country; and I hear Stingaree is just as much of a hero in their eyes as ever Ned Kelly was."

"Has anybody gone for the police?"

"No; we said we'd leave it till morning, since he's absolutely safe where he is. The fact is, however, that we don't want people

to sit up for it and make a scene. They're all going to turn in after supper, with the exception of a very few of us, who will keep watch and watch about."

"By order of the new owner again?" asked Irralie, with the least possible sneer.

"Well, at his suggestion."

"He seems to have taken command of the place!"

"In a way he has; but it's a way I don't object to myself. You want a strong man to say what should and should not be done in a case like this. There would certainly have been a panic and a general clearance if it hadn't been for Mr. Fullarton. You should have heard Mrs. Browne going on about her diamonds! So all the ladies are going to hand over their valuables to be put in the safe, and one of us will keep the key. And you mustn't think ill of Fullarton, Irralie. I own he's a cool hand, and bosses us all about perhaps a bit too much; but your father himself said he was thankful he had turned up in time to relieve him of the

greatest responsibility that has ever come his way."

"That may be so," began Irralie, as if she were about to say a good deal more. But she thought of the night before, and of her great mistake ; and she held her peace.

"Aren't you going to supper at all?" asked Young, suddenly.

"No. I couldn't! I've been too much mixed up in this, and I came out for a little air instead. I think I must just put my nose inside the pines."

"Don't go far, Irralie!"

"Very well, George. So long!"

She left him, passing through the narrow cut between the forge and the iron-store : partly because that was her bee-line for the beloved pines, and partly she knew not why. There was a small window high up at the back of the store. A human head would hardly have passed through ; but when Irralie glanced up at the aperture her heart leapt to her throat. A white shirt-sleeve hung out in the moonlight, and a hand was strug-

gling to unscrew one of the nuts with which the sheets of iron were bolted together.

"Here—George!" cried Irralie, without a thought.

He came running up; but, ere he reached her, the shirt-sleeve had been whipped in, and something else had happened too. The girl was sorry she had called him.

"He'll escape!" she cried. "I will tell you how."

She lowered her voice and pointed to the aperture. It was open. Could he not escape by that.

"Never!" he whispered. "Your young brothers couldn't."

"No? Yes, I see you're right. I must be nervous: I won't tackle the pines after all."

She followed him back through the cut, and as she did so a voice, low and bitter, came through the iron walls.

"Thank you, Miss Villiers!" it said. "I call that kind!"

CHAPTER IX

TO SLOW MUSIC

“ Thank you, Miss Villiers ! I call that kind ! ”

The words followed Irralie to her room, and kept her from her bed. They sang in her ears and were written in her brain. They were the words of a villain, and yet they cut her to the heart. They cut her so cruelly, and in such open and prolonged defiance of her reason, that the shameful truth came home to her at last. They were the words of a villain whom she loved.

Yes, she had loved, as she had distrusted him, from the very first. That was why she had said nothing about the pistol. That was why she had suggested the lost overcoat. She had done this, and left that undone, on instinct simply. And instinctively she had loved him from the first.

Her thoughts had been of him and him alone from the very moment of their meeting on the box-clump edge. In all her life she had known no such anguish as her doubts of him, and no such happiness as that brief spell of confidence restored. But trust and doubt were now two things of the past. Certainty took their place; and yet the love remained.

It was monstrous, it was grotesque, but it was nevertheless a fact to be faced. She had made so dire a fool of herself that she could laugh outright; and did so, once, at a sudden sight of her own image in the glass. She had never taken off her dress; the muslin was no longer crisp; the rowans drooped upon their stalks; and at the thought of the mad folly underneath, she laughed in her own white face and burning eyes. But the laugh rang false and ended in a groan; it did not help her to face the fact; nor did she try to do so much longer, but resigned herself to her fate once and for all.

She found it less easy, however, to re-

sign herself to the fate of the man she loved. He lay captive within thirty yards of her room. In the morning he would be taken away; then tried; then put in prison for the rest of his life; and he so young! It was terrible—unthinkable—but it should not be. But for her he would have broken prison already. She had not known her heart when she cried out to George Young; but that cry had made her know it; and now, if escape were possible, she would undo what she had then done by helping him to escape.

So Irralie decided, with a trembling but a lightened heart. The difficulty and the danger removed the lens from her own feelings, turned her eyes outwards, and gave a new tone to her nerves. Her practical side reasserted itself, and in an instant she was thinking how the thing could be done. And as she thought, the even breathing of a houseful of sleepers came through the thin wooden walls to encourage her.

So the other women were all asleep!

Then surely there was little to be feared from the male encampment so much farther away ; and she would have to pit her wits against those of the established guard alone. She would outwit them, never fear ! She would give them a false alarm, and then tear open the door the moment their backs were turned. Thoughts wild as these darted through her brain in the first excitement of resolve ; but her preparations were no less swiftly and cunningly made.

She changed her ball-slippers for a bedroom pair that would make no noise on the veranda. She enveloped herself from head to heel in an old, black waterproof cloak, which would never be seen in the shadow of a veranda or through the fronds of a pine. She put matches and a candle-end in her pocket ; and thus accoutred she crept out, shutting the door very softly behind her.

The moon was setting in a blur of clouds ; that was one thing already in Irralie's favor. She stole to the corner of the front veranda, and peeped round very cautiously

for fear of rousing sleepy watchers from their chairs. There were none. The veranda was deserted ; so was the yard. The very sentinel had been withdrawn from the iron-store door.

Irralie could scarce believe her eyes. Her heart beat high ; and yet the seeming safety had in ways a greater terror for her than danger seen and realized. She bent her head and listened intently. At first nothing ; then a clink, then a laugh, in the middle distance, through closed doors ; and then a snatch of Mendelssohn, wonderfully played on the harsh old school-room piano, but with the soft pedal down all the time. Irralie listened with raised eyebrows and a hostile heart for the accomplished exquisite to whom she had not yet spoken a word. But a moment later she had her second glimpse of him. The *lieder* ended, a door opened, and out came the pianist with the strut of a game-cock and the carriage of a guardsman. One glance through his eye-glass at the iron-store, and he was gone as

he had come ; and a comic song of Jevons's, struck up that moment to his own vile accompaniment, was cut short in the very first bar.

Irralie now knew where the watchers were spending the night ; but she was curious to discover of whom exactly the guard consisted, and whether music was its only joy. To peer through the passage and door by which the Englishman had come out and gone in again would, however, be rash, since the yard afforded no sort of cover. But there was the door at which Irralie herself had stood and looked upon the pines ; she could therefore stand among the pines and look in at this door. And in two minutes' time she was actually doing so ; nor had a twig cracked or a wire jingled on the way.

The door was wide open, but Irralie was too far from it to see very much of the lamp-lit room within ; but she saw young Hodging, sprawled across a desk and fast asleep, and that half of the piano on the top of

which stood bottles, glasses, and a bedroom ewer. This at first was all that was visible to Irralie through the door. Then Jevons came upon the narrow scene to help himself freely from a bottle and sparingly from the ewer; and the Englishman joined him, looking keenly in his flushed face, and as keenly at the prostrate tutor, before he himself opened a bottle of soda-water, and poured it ostentatiously into a glass containing no whiskey at all.

All this time but little had been said, and still less had the girl been able to overhear. The first words she could distinguish were addressed by George Young (who was invisible) to Jevons the storekeeper.

"Hodding's drunk," said he (in a voice which certified the speaker, at any rate, as beyond reproach); "and you mean to get drunker because you can stand more! If I was Mr. Fullarton—well, I wish I was!"

The owner's reply sounded tolerant, for him; it was, however, inaudible; and as he

spoke he went out once more by the other door, and returned briskly next moment.


"All well?" asked Young.

"Right as rain! We might as well turn in."

"I sha'n't. One never knows. Besides, there's the police to fetch some time, and a horse ready saddled in the stable. If I had my way I'd fetch 'em now."

"My dear, good fellow, where's the point?" asked the Englishman, screwing round on the music-stool with his eye-glass flaming in the lamp-light. "That chap's all right! We've tied him too tight to move. In any case, when there's the least occasion for anybody to go, Mr. Young, you may rely upon due notice to that effect from me."

So saying, he turned abruptly to the piano; and Irralie, turning also, stole in deeper among the trees, with the first notes of Chopin's funeral march in her ears, and clear in her brain the image of a very formidable opponent indeed. He was brisk,



alert, resolute, educated, masterful, indeed all one could wish one's opponent not to be ; and the mannerisms of a coxcomb made him, even in the girl's eyes, all the more dangerous a man. This she realized while making a considerable *détour* among the pines. But her determination was unshaken and her nerve only tuned to a higher pitch when she emerged from the plantation at the back of the iron-store.

It was darker than ever, so that the angle of the prison roof was lost against the clouded blackness of the sky. And Irralie could touch the iron before she was sure that no face looked out upon her from the small square window. Yet the window was open, as it had been before.

She stood on tip-toe to put her mouth to the wooden sill and whisper, "Are you awake?"

"Miss Villiers! Can that be you?"

The voice came from the level of Irralie's knees. "I want to speak to you," she said. "Stand up, or we shall be heard."

"I can't. They've tied me down by the hand. They handcuffed me down before, but I slipped the handcuff."

"Well! I want to get you out altogether."

"What, after giving me away as you did to Young?"

"I didn't give you away at all. But I'll have no more words about anything that's past. I know what you are, and what you deserve. Another word about that and I leave you to your fate!"

"Very well; let it rest. Have they sent for the police?"

"Not yet. I don't know why not. They're having quite a musical evening. I believe there's a horse all ready in the stables. I mean that horse for you. Did you manage to move any of these nuts?"

"Not one."

"No more can I. I'm going to look for a screw-hammer. Oh, I don't care what you've done! I want you to have this one more chance, and not be taken here!"

She was gone before he could reply. She went as she had come, and heard on the way the finish of the funeral march. Then came a difficulty. The screw-hammer was in the tool-box—the tool-box in the store. The store was locked, and the key, no doubt, in Jevons's or George Young's or the new owner's pocket.

She went to her room and racked her brains ; all she could think of was a box of boys' tools in her brothers' room. There might be a pair of pincers in that box, and a pair of pincers might do. In any case she would go and look.

The boys were sleeping heavily: they did not hear her open the door, but one of them moved in his sleep as she struck a match and then shaded it with her hand. The tool-box was under their dressing-table. She carried it bodily to her room ; there *were* pincers, and strong ones too. But would they answer ?

She crept round the veranda once more, and was about to dart across to the pines

at their nearest point when once again the spruce, straight figure in the gaiters and riding-breeches strode out into the yard. He stood there a moment whistling Chopin to himself, and looking about him smartly. The girl crouched down behind a chair. Then, to her horror, he walked in the direction of the iron-store. If his step should be taken for hers !

She saw him look at the padlock, and disappear between the two iron buildings. If he had done so five minutes before ! He was an age away ; indeed, she saw him no more ; for, from where she crouched, the school-room building overlapped the iron-store ; and when she could stay there no longer for suspense, and made a dash of it for the pines, she heard him talking to Young just as when she passed before. He had returned to the school-room by the other door, and precious minutes had been lost.

“ I'd given you up ! ”

“ That man frightened me. Did you speak to him ? ”

“ No.”

“ Nor he to you ? ”

“ Only a word or two.”

“ I didn’t hear : so they wouldn’t hear us : but you must listen while I work. Listen hardest when he’s not playing ! If they come you must make a noise, and I’ll get away while they’re opening the door.”

“ You are very good.”

“ Not a word about that—or anything else. Now let me try. Ah, how difficult to do it quietly ! ”

For the pincers were large enough to bite the nuts, but first they snapped together, and then they banged heavily against the iron. Irralie desisted and held her breath in despair. The music had not recommenced, and sure enough there came footsteps ; but the prisoner instantly began beating with his head or his knee against the corrugated iron.

“ Stop that row ! ”

“ What ! mayn’t I be musical, too ? ”

“ No, you may not.”

"Right you are."

The steps retreated. Irralie breathed again. Then with her fingers she felt for a dwarf sheet of iron; most of them were as tall as herself, by some eighteen inches in width; but at last she found a short strip cut to fill a gap. It was between two and three feet in height, and it reached to the ground, where it was nailed to a horizontal slab of wood. Five bolts clamped it in all: one to the strip above and two at each side. Irralie tapped it gently about the centre.

"Are you anywhere near this?"

"Just behind!"

"Then if I can unscrew five nuts you are a free man."

She went to work on the first. "Fold your handkerchief," he whispered, "and work through that. There will be less fear of a noise." For now, when it was wanted most, the school-room piano was still. And the night was darker than ever, an unmixed blessing when a ray of moonshine would have meant discovery. But Irralie felt her

way and persevered. And at last a nut budged.

“One!” whispered Irralie.

“Loosen them all, but take none off yet.”

The next moved readily; the third stuck; the fourth was the worst of all; and the fifth was just yielding when the prisoner whispered, “Stop!”

“Hear it?” said George Young’s voice.

“Not a sound! You’re becoming imaginative. You’d much better go to bed.”

“Or for the police.”

“Oh, perdition seize the police! I’ve a great mind not to have them called in at all!”

“What?”

“My good Young!” responded the other in his weariest drawl; “do not, for pity’s sake, scream at me like that! It’s confoundedly ill-bred. If you’re too dense to see my point, come back to the school-room and let me explain it where we sha’n’t be overheard by the person most interested.”

The voices ceased.

"He didn't speak to *me* like that," muttered the man in the iron-store.

"He's an affected beast!" whispered Irralie, prettily, as she set down the pincers and began taking off the nuts with her naked fingers.

"Steady now, Miss Villiers. It may crack like thunder. Be prepared to run!"

So slowly, however, did she bend the sheet down, and with so firm a hand—slipped gradually to the base—on either side, that the task was accomplished all but noiselessly. The prisoner was revealed hunched up within.

"How have they bound you?"

"The bad hand tight to my body; the other and both my feet to a plough or something."

"I haven't a knife."

"And I lost mine the other day!"

"But I have my fingers—and patience," said Irralie, "if only there is time. Ah, thank Heaven for that!" The opening movement of the "Moonlight Sonata" had

come suddenly to their ears, played in the distance with improved precision, and as much feeling as the permanent soft pedal and the school-room piano would permit.

Irralie knelt with head and arms through the aperture, and began upon the knot that bound his hand. His breath was on her cheek, but she got it undone. The feet were less elaborately secured, and he was able to help with his liberated hand. In five minutes from the unscrewing of the last nut he was free to rise, and yet too stiff to stir.

At last he managed it with the loss of more time ; and more yet went in replacing the iron and lightly refixing three nuts. But on this he himself insisted, and Beethoven in the school-room still gave them warrant for delay.

"The pines!" quavered Irralie, near hysterics now that her own part was played. "Come quick—come quick! The long way round to the stables—by the stock-yards—by the tents—you follow me!"

Once through the wires—once well among the trees—they flew like birds, Irralie cutting deep and circling wide. It was terribly dark, but the girl knew every inch of the ground. They passed the broken column without a word. They skirted the tents so perilously that the snores of the occupants purred in their ears. Then once more through wires—Irralie held them apart for him—and so to the stables under cover of the night alone. But now there was neither moon nor star, nor as yet any sign of dawn in the inky sky.

The stable had risen in front of them as from the ground ; they could have touched it with their hands, and were about to turn a corner of the long, low, pine-log building, when Irralie seized her companion's arm and stopped him dead.

Voices were approaching from the other side.

CHAPTER X

IRRALIE'S DESERTS

The voices were in dispute so warm that even the Englishman's had lost something of its habitual drawling deliberation. But not until the speakers were inside the stable could the pair without catch a word. Then they heard everything through the cracks and crannies between log and log.

"Look you hear, my good Young! This station is my property, and I don't intend to have the police on the place at all."

"Very sorry, Mr. Fullarton; but Mr. Villiers is still manager of the station; and I gave him my word they should be sent for hours ago. If you object, wake up the boss and settle it with him."

"Of course, I won't do that! But I do object; and I only wish you kept all your promises as well!"

"What do you mean?"

"You promised *me* to be responsible for the iron-store and our friend inside."

"You kept saying he was so safe! You yourself asked me in to have a drink!"

"Well, my good fellow, but if it comes to keeping one's word! You should practise what you preach. No man can be in two places at once; you undertake to remain in one, yet you want to go gallivanting after the police!"

"I can't help it. The other young fools are not fit."

"What about me?"

"You!" cried Young.

"Why not, my friend? Now look you here: let us understand each other. I don't want the police at all. I want to put that chap in a buggy and tool him over to the police, with two or three of us, well-armed, beside him. He would never be idiot enough to try anything on, and the whole thing would be done quietly without fuss. That's *my* idea. I've said it till I'm

sick of saying it ; but no, you must have the police and a public fuss, and our own men jeering at us and cheering Stingaree ! Very well, my fine friend ; I know a stubborn man when I meet one, and I give in. But if anybody goes for the police it shall be myself ; only I don't come back till they've been and gone ! ”

The listeners heard a match struck, and smelt tobacco ; but see they could not, without searching for a cranny wider than its fellows ; and not a muscle had they moved as yet.

“ You wouldn't know the way,” they heard Young answer. “ Which way did you come ? ”

“ I believe through a howling desert you call the horse-paddock.”

“ Well, when you get out of that you take the right-hand track ; not the left—that takes you to the Seven-mile. Follow the track to the right till you strike the stock-route and telegraph posts. Five miles along the stock-route—this time to the left,

mind—and you come to the township and the police-barracks. But you'd much better let me go ! ”

“ Not I, my good friend. I've heard a good deal of you young Australians ; let me see one of you stick to his post ! In ten minutes I shall be off ; but I must first go and fetch my valise. Come along, Mr. Inexorable Young ! ”

And they were gone ; their voices dwindled and died ; and Irralie was peering at her ruffianly companion with an admiration sanctioned and concealed by the night.

“ He was frightened to be left in charge of you ! ” she said. “ He's not the man I took him for, after all. But be quick—the horse ! the horse ! ”

They crept round to the stable-door, and found a piebald mare standing saddled in the stall.

“ Venus,” said Irralie, blowing out the match. “ She shows, but she can go ! Did you listen to those directions ? ”

“ Yes.”

"Then for mercy's sake don't follow them! Now, have we given them long enough? Mount in here; the stirrups might clink; they'll see nothing, but they might hear!"

"For the life of me I don't know why you are doing this!"

"Nor I." She struck another match. "Mount! mount!" she cried in an agony. But the match only showed her a handsome, heedless face touched for once with tenderness and concern. The dark eyes melted into hers; she dropped the match and put it out with her foot.

"If they take you again," she whispered, "I shall die!"

"They sha'n't. I am going. If I could only tell you——"

"Don't try: go now: for my sake!"

He was in the saddle. She caught up an armful of straw, and threw it on the ground to deaden the noise. He leant over the withers as she led the animal forth.

"Promise me one thing," he whispered, suddenly, "or I sha'n't go at all!"

“What !”

“To let no one dream it was you—to go straight to your **room** and stop there till broad daylight !”

“I promise—I promise.”

“Lives may depend upon it ! Good-by, then. God knows how I’ve deceived you ! I never hope to be forgiven !”

“Oh, go—go ! You are breaking my heart !”

She caught and wrung his extended hand, then flung it from her with a sudden gesture of despair. A touch with his heels, and he was gone at an amble ; a greater pace would have increased sound and risk alike ; and yet even the gentle rhythm of those unshod, ambling hoofs was like thunder in the ears of Irralie. Others must hear ! She crushed her thumbs into her ears and stood like one demented. When she removed them the sound was fainter, and still there was no other. She waited, however, with hardly a breath until all was still but her own heart, and a locust in the pines. Then for a space

her strength failed her, and she leaned heavily against the stable wall.

But her brain was busy all the time, and her heart with that lawless rider over every inch of the well-known ground. Now they were at the horse-paddock gate; now galloping beyond in the teeth of their own wind. And so Irralie forgot for the moment the one injunction she had received, the one promise she had given. When at length she came back to herself, and her own peril involving his, she ran like a deer to the station; and very nearly into the arms of the last man she wanted to meet, who was stepping down from the veranda with his valise under his arm.

“Er—Miss Villiers, I presume?” said he in his well-bred drawl; and a hat was taken off with a little flourish in the dark.

Irralie had instinctively determined to disarm suspicion with civility, and, simultaneously, to delay to the last moment the discovery of the empty stable which would

lead inevitably to that of the prisoner's escape. She therefore said, graciously—

“How do you know?”

“It could be no one else. I have not had the privilege of seeing you before. And then, Miss Villiers, none but the very spirited would choose a night of alarms for a ramble in the small hours! And that I find to be your reputation.”

“Indeed!” said Irralie. “I couldn’t sleep, that was all.”

“So?”

“I was listening to your delightful music!” said Irralie, who was charmed to find herself detaining him with such ease. He had actually sat down on the edge of the veranda, with the valise across his knees; but at this last speech he sprang to his feet.

“You heard me?” he cried. “I am sorry, and yet glad! Sorry to have kept you awake—I had no idea anybody could hear—and yet delighted to think I should have such a listener. And you say *you* were

delighted too ! You appreciate ! You have a soul for it ! I am indeed glad that we have met, even at the eleventh hour ! May I light a cigarette and talk a little music for five minutes ? ”

“ Do—please ! ” said Irralie, with perfectly sincere enthusiasm.

“ It is so refreshing to find anybody one *can* talk to up here ! The piano, of course, was execrable, though not much worse than the thing you had to dance to ; but it was in reasonably good tune, and one was glad to touch one again. I am going to send home for my Erard. Music one must have—especially in the desert—music and flowers. I mean to make this place one mass of geraniums ! Geraniums and pansies and sweet-williams. I love those old crude flowers ! ”

He struck a match, and Irralie snatched a straw from the skirts of her cloak. She saw the rings blazing on his fingers as the tobacco caught and burnt. To her disappointment, however, instead of continuing the

conversation, he looked at his watch by the match-light, and professed surprise at the time. It was after three o'clock. Not another moment could he stay.

"But where are you going?" asked the guilty Irralie.

"To the township—for the police—entirely against what I believe to be my better judgment. I don't intend to come back till they're gone. I wonder, Miss Villiers, if you would come up to the stable and see me off?"

Irralie hesitated in a tremor of nervous apprehensions; but decided to keep suspicion disarmed, and said, as best she could, "Certainly, if you wish it, Mr. Fullarton." Her voice shook, however, and her knees trembled, as she followed him into the dark.

"You sympathize with that poor beggar!" he startled her by saying as they walked.

"What makes you think that?"

"You weren't at the supper-table. You were with him when he was taken. You seemed to like the fellow!"

“I did,” said the girl, honestly; “and I do sympathize with him in a way. Ah, you have been brought up in England; you can’t understand. A bush girl might be sorry for a bushranger, but it would pass your comprehension altogether. It is only natural that it should.”

“I am not so sure about that!”

The girl had spoken earnestly. It was good merely to find herself saying something that she really felt. But at his tone she threw reserve to the winds, and caught him by the sleeve on the very threshold of the empty stable. If she could prevail upon him not to enter it at all!

“Spare him!” she cried to that end. “Oh, Mr. Fullarton, obey your better judgment and don’t go for the police at all. Think what will happen. They may hang him—and he a young man—as young as yourself! Give him a chance to escape; spare him, as you hope to be spared!”

The other, however, only laughed, and entering the stable struck a match. But

without a sign of surprise he flashed it from the empty stall into Irralie's white face.

"Now, Miss Villiers!" said he, coldly, "what have you done with that horse?"

"I?"

She swayed where she stood, taken utterly, hopelessly, by surprise.

"Yes, you!" he answered with subdued ferocity. "You had come from this when I met you just now. I saw the straw on your cloak. You have let out that horse—confess the truth!"

His manner acted on Irralie like a tonic. "I deny your right to question me," she answered, with spirit; "nothing else! Now let me pass."

But he had stooped and picked up something as the match burnt his fingers. And for hours after, as it seemed to Irralie, he stood and blocked her way in the dark silence of the tomb.

"At least you do things thoroughly," he said at last, with his insolent sneer. "You have let out not only the horse, but—Heaven

knows how!—the man as well. He shed this bandage in the straw ! ”

“ Let me pass ! ” cried Irralie. “ This instant—or I call for help ! ”

The answer came with a crisp, metallic click :

“ Call at your peril ! I should be sorry to inconvenience a lady of your spirit, but the slightest sound will compel me to put a bullet through your heart ! ”

“ Mr. Fullarton ! ” gasped the girl.

“ Not a bit of it,” he replied. “ Between ourselves, they call me Stingaree ! ”

CHAPTER XI

THE REAL THING

Irralie saw the whole truth in one blinding flash. And through all her terror there came an instant thrill of unutterable happiness. She loved and had delivered an innocent man ; pure thankfulness for his innocence was her first overwhelming emotion ; her next—was different. But it was characteristic of Irralie's case that even now she thought last of herself and the extremity she was in. To this, however, she was speedily recalled by the cool drawl of her villainous companion.

“ Well ! I never saw anything fall so flat ! ” said he. “ Still, it's a matter for congratulation that you didn't sing out. I should certainly have shot you dead ! ”

“ You dare not ! ”

“Try me. I should then discover the open prison and my own crime! It would be very neat.”

“You beast!” said Irralie.

“Thank you. I am one. But it’s your own fault, Miss Villiers, if you force me to show my bestial side to *you*; I assure you I’ve no wish to do so. I want a horse. You took the one that was here, and you will very kindly help me to find another.”

“Very well,” said Irralie, wondering whether Fullarton was yet half-way to the police-barracks. “We must go to the horse-paddock. You lead the way.”

“No. I prefer to see you in front of me. And I shall need saddle and bridle, so you will be good enough to show me to the saddle-room. But please, my dear young lady, to remember that one cry——”

“Oh, I’m not likely to forget that!”

And Irralie led him out, and round the building to the saddle-room door, with a coolness that surprised herself. But she was still thinking more of the honest man who

had flown than of the ruffian left behind to her cost. Was the one so very honest after all? She felt more hurt by his harmless dissimulation at the last than she had ever been by the gross fraud of which she had suspected him up to the end. Nor could she see any reason for it; forgetting how determined she had been not to hear from him a single word of self-defence; forgetting, also, how plainly she had shown him that determination. Even his ready flight for the police struck her in an unheroic light; and that view of him was the hardest of all to bear.

The bushranger had struck matches and put a saddle over his arm. He now took down a side-saddle (Irralie's own) and put it on top of the other, with a bridle to spare. This put an end to Irralie's thoughts.

"Who's that for?" she gasped.

"For you, of course."

"For me!"

"Well, obviously I can't leave you here to raise an earlier alarm than there will be

in any case. And I'd much rather not tie you to a tree. But it's either that or setting me on my way. What do you say?"

"I am in your hands," she replied; but a great thought was leaping in her heart. On foot she was utterly at the mercy of this infamous armed man. But she was a first-rate horse-woman, and in the saddle she might at least elude him.

"This is about as much as I can carry on one arm, and your spirit compels me to leave the other one free in case of need," said Stingaree. "I must therefore ask you to be so good as to carry my valise. It is very ungallant, but you leave me no choice."

The valise lay on the ground. Irralie picked it up. Its heaviness surprised her, and the contents rattled under her arm.

"Its weight don't represent its worth," remarked the bushranger, opening the door for Irralie with his revolver-point. "It would be an uncommon poor haul but for those Quandong diamonds. And now I

think we'll talk no more until we've given this place a rather wider berth."

Nor did they, but passed in silence so close to the back veranda that Irralie could have thrown a stone through the open window of her empty room. She wondered whether she should ever see it again. For her brain was now teeming with daring projects and attempts, for which her present submission was but to pave the way. And to pave it the more effectively, when he spoke again she replied with a suavity not inferior to his own.

He had said, "Upon my word, Miss Villiers, I am ashamed to have to treat you like this!"

"I am sure you are," replied Irralie. "But there's one thing you might do to pass the time."

"Only tell me what!"

"You might explain exactly how you planned and carried out this conspiracy. It would edify me, and it couldn't hurt you."

“ My dear young lady, with all my heart,” replied Stingaree. “ I ask no greater privilege than to afford you any little compensation in my power. The facts of the case are very simple. Last Saturday morning nothing was farther from our minds ; but we had been engaged upon some trifling business on the Balranald road, and as that was blocked against us north and south we thought it best to strike a straight line east across the fenced country. Late in the afternoon we came to your boundary, but had no notion of looking you up, when we lit on a beautifully dressed young man, equally well-mounted, but hopelessly lost in the bush. Well, Howie’s horse was dead-beat, for we had been pushing the pace a bit ; and Howie’s clothes were dead-beat also ; and Howie himself being not more than a size or so larger than that young gentleman, both in height and build——”

“ And I never thought of that before ! ”

“ No, Miss Villiers ? Well, you weren’t

meant to ; though the last thing *we* hoped for was that our young gentleman would keep the incident to himself. You may hear from him why he did, and when you do I should like to know. To proceed, however, we stuck him up (to use a vile expression) in due course ; and Howie and he exchanged horses and clothes ; and Howie nearly spoilt everything by leaving a loaded shooter in the coat he took off. However, as our friend hadn't condescended to put it on up to the time we left him, no harm was done. Howie, I should explain, is my mate (to employ another barbarism) ; and a very worthy soul, though no gentleman. But here we are at last at the horse-paddock gate ! ”

It was open ; probably Fullarton had been unable to shut it with his one hand ; nevertheless, it conveyed to Irralie the picture of a man galloping for his life and those of his friends ; and her heart softened as it leapt again. Nor was there a horse to be seen from the gate. And before striking into the paddock to look for one, the bush-

ranger hung the saddles over the top bar to rest his arm.

"And where have you both been ever since?" inquired Irralie, finessing still, but also interested to know.

"Aha!" said he. "I'm not sure that I shall tell you that. Yet I don't know; have you ever heard of a man they call Deaf Dawson?"

"Heard of him! Why, he drives the whim at our Seven-mile."

"Yes; but did you never hear my name coupled with his? I don't mean my real name. There's not a soul in the Colony knows *that*. But Stingaree?"

"Yes, I have," said Irralie. "He was said to have known you."

"To have been my mate! That's more like it. He and Howie and I once stood in together—before we were quite so well known. Now can you guess where we've been since Saturday; and who told us you were going to have all the back-blocks at the station last night; and who came in

with Howie to the men's hut, and found out that the new chum had been too ashamed to explain away his old clothes, and was looked on with suspicion because of them? I think it must be obvious; and now we'll catch that horse."

Obvious it was; and Irralie's heart sank quicker than it had risen. She had relied upon Deaf Dawson. He was a man not generally liked upon the station; a man who kept himself to himself in his outlying hut, where he was seldom visited by anybody except on business. But Irralie had stopped in her rides to shout into his ear-trumpet. And she had credited the man with some slight fondness for her; and had determined to put it to the test, if fortune favored her with a faster horse than might fall to Stingaree. She now knew what to expect at the deaf man's hands.

But she was glad that she had steeled herself to converse with Stingaree. Here was one good thing come of it already; it was very good indeed to be forewarned. She

must now think of some other plan ; and as she thought, they were walking off the track among the salt-bush in search of horses ; and as they walked half-a-dozen came suddenly like phantoms across their path.

Stingaree caught one adroitly, and Irralie was no less quick to secure another by the mane. She was as anxious as he to be in the saddle ; and the saddling fell to her, while Stingaree stood at the horses' heads. So Irralie left the girths of the man's saddle judiciously loose ; but when he had helped her to mount he would not let her handle her own reins ; and before mounting himself he tightened his girths without a word. So they rode on together in silence at a steady canter, and the girl's hands were empty of rein or switch. Her mount was a quiet, in-offensive buggy-horse ; and his, one of her small brother's ponies. Short of the farther gate, he pulled them both up suddenly.

"Do you know," said he, "that your father is a very innocent man ?"

"Indeed !" said Irralie, who had thought

often and bitterly of her father since falling into the clutches of this wretch.

"Yes! Just imagine the skipper turning in with a dangerous pirate in irons in his deck-house! Nice thing to do, was it not?"

Irralie would not speak; that very thought had been her own.

"Well," proceeded the other, "you mustn't be too hard on the poor unfortunate skipper! He has bad teeth. He mentioned the matter to me. I asked to see the inside of his medicine-chest, and ever since he's been lying on his own store floor, full to the nose with chloral! I thought it a good thing done," he concluded, laughing; "but I only wish to heaven I could have got quit of that confounded pig-headed overseer as cheap!"

Still Irralie refused to speak; and now they were at the farther gate. This also had been left open; but it had swung to again; and as Stingaree leaned over to push it open, Irralie raised the pommel which she had unscrewed from her saddle, and struck

the screw with all her might into the hand that held her reins. In another instant she was through the gate and galloping headlong into the paddock beyond.

A scream, an oath, a shot, and then the tattoo of the pony's hoofs pursued her into the night; but as yet the latter showed no sign of lifting; and Irralie felt that she could risk the random shots. Five followed her in quick succession, and one hummed past her ear. But she had straddled her mount, and hid her face in the mane, and her first great anxiety was at rest. She had retrieved her reins without getting them hobbled about the horse's legs.

The shots gave Irralie (what his polite threats and elaborate phrases had hitherto denied her) a sufficiently lurid insight into the ferocious nature of the man against whom she had pitted herself. Not that she was filled with any special loathing for the dastard who would empty his revolver upon a defenceless girl; never in the habit of claiming peculiar protection on the strength of

her girlhood, she had in this case lost sight of sex, and, fully conscious that it was she who had struck the first shrewd blow, she was as fully ready for reprisal in kind. Nevertheless, the instant shooting was a revelation of character which prepared her for death at those bloody hands, should she again fall into them. But of this she never seemed in serious danger ; a short, sharp chase over the salt-bush and through the scrub, and the chase was over ; either the pony had stumbled, or the rider had decided that his own flight was the first consideration. Irralie, at all events, found herself cantering quite alone under a wide, sable sky ; and the discovery filled her with an awe for which there had been no time in the heat of the chase itself. What was she to do ? There were but two gates to the paddock ; was she to go on to the one at the whim, and risk the villains there ; or should she return to the gate at which she had committed her assault, and perhaps fall in with the greatest villain of them all, who

would certainly murder her now? There were two other courses. She might hide all night in the heart of the paddock—say in that very clump where she had first seen Fullarton—or she might strike the horse-paddock fence, strap down the wires, lead her horse across, and so gallop back to the homestead and give the first alarm. She felt that she would risk something to do even that ; and decided, after a horrible minute, in which she could only hear her own horse panting, upon the last-named course.

She gained the fence ; she dismounted and strapped down the wires ; she was herself in the horse-paddock, tugging at the reins ; but the old buggy-horse had not made the leap when the hoofs of another broke upon her terrified ears, first galloping, then trotting, and finally only ambling down the fence. But the girl was too panic-stricken to attempt to mount. And, just as the sky seemed a shade lighter from rim to rim, and a breath of wind blew in the morning, Stingaree reined up leisurely at her side.

“Waiting for you at the gate,” said he.
“You should have struck the fence higher up.”

He slipped off and led his mount back into the paddock which Irralie's had never left. Then he undid the straps and put Irralie in her saddle again without a word on either side. Not one syllable about the blow she had dealt him ; but there was now a crust of blood upon the hand that held her reins ; and his features, which the night had hidden, became clearer every moment, with their weeping whiskers, the glass shining in one eye, and an expression so malevolent as to make the silence more sinister than any speech.

They cantered to the track, and thence onward to the whim ; but its timbers were slow to appear against the sky, for the dawn was breaking at their backs. Irralie never opened her mouth ; but once the bushranger seemed to her to slacken the pace for the express purpose of humming the 30th of the *Lieder Ohne Worte* to the time of the

pony's hoofs. And about five o'clock in the morning they reached the whim-driver's hut.

A big, black-bearded, round-shouldered ruffian, looking grotesque in a white tight collar and a full suit of fashionable tweeds, all too small for him, stood at the door and expressed profane surprise at the sight of Irralie. "But," said he, "we've got a bit of a startler for you, too, boss!" The light-eyed, thick-set, iron-gray whim-driver took down his ear-trumpet and turned away without a word. As for Irralie, she saw the red light of a fire in the hut as she dismounted, and she entered, calculating that it was thirteen miles from the station to the police barracks, but that Fullarton should have covered them by quarter-past four. And next moment she saw him before her eyes; he was standing in his shirt-sleeves with his back to the fire, and with an indolent, half-amused, wholly characteristic expression, which froze upon his face, however, as their eyes met.

CHAPTER XII

THE MEN AT THE HUT

“ Irralie ! ”

“ Mr. Fullarton ! ”

“ Well ! what in blazes brought *him* here ? ”

The three speakers stood aghast in a common stupefaction. It was impossible to choose between their blank, incredulous faces. But Stingaree's eye-glass was swinging on its cord ; and he turned upon huge Howie with the savage alacrity of a man uncertain of his friends.

“ Easy does it, mister ; *he's* all right,” responded Howie, in a heavy deferential manner that fitted him no better than Fullarton's clothes. “ ‘ *E's* done brown ; come here to get the deaf 'un to go back with 'im and swear 'e wasn't Stingaree ! So 'e tum-

bles into a bloomin' 'ornet's nest for his pains, an' very near gets stung by a lump o' lead; only we was two to one, w'ich settles it out o' court. But we now delivers 'im over to you, and glad to get the beggar off of our 'ands."

Fullarton had handed Irralie to an old soap-box (in lieu of a chair) by the fire-side; of the others he took no more notice than to nod to her in confirmation of Howie's report. The latter had a marked effect upon Stingaree.

"Excellent!" cried he, with the lop-sided grin of all eye-glassed men. "I pictured those dear good troopers a paddock behind us; and behold them still in their beds! Your hand, my friend, your horny hand! It's a near thing yet though. Where's that ear-trumpet?"

It hung round the deaf-man's neck, as he knelt scowling over the billy-can upon the fire. Stingaree seized it, thrust the end into the other's ear, and roared through the trumpet, "Tea for the lot of us, quick as

you know how!" Dawson growled, but threw a handful of tea into the can as the water broke out in bubbles; and Irralie watched him from her seat beside the fire. He refused to look at her. His face was as dark as aloes against its mat of iron-gray hair; his expression as bitter.

While the tea drew, Stingaree took Howie aside. They whispered together at the door, and the coarse, big man in the fine, tight collar and clothes, and the little whiskered dandy—all weapons and jewels—made a quaint pair, framed in the doorway, touched on one side by the warm fire-light, and on the other by that of the raw red east. Fullarton never forgot them. But Irralie, after failing in all her efforts to catch the deaf man's sullen eye, was comparing Fullarton and Stingaree. And here the contrast was the more remarkable in that both had good looks; yet the ready, energetic, strutting bantam of a man was not only a stronger figure than his heedless, indolent, hare-brained captive; he looked

still, and in the teeth of the facts, the likelier gentleman of the two.

"They're listening—the two of 'em!" cried Howie, suddenly. "They can 'ear every word; let's get outside."

Stingaree looked round the hut; there was but the one door, and no window save those on either side of it; inner compartment there was none, and the floor was honest earth.

"All right—a few yards," said he. "I tell you, Howie, I mean to have my way; and you know what *that* means. So let's fix it here on the spot. You may go to the devil or stop where you are. I'll have my way about the girl!"

Howie's reply was inaudible; they were well outside the hut; but before Irralie and Fullarton could exchange more than glances, he was back, and had snatched the ear-trumpet from the deaf man's neck. Dawson turned round with a curse, his face scrubbed by the cord; but Howie was gone, and the other made no attempt to

rise or follow, but only darkened his scowl as he stirred the tea and added sugar for all.

"I know what that means," said Fullarton. "We're not to get at him. We shall see!"

He took a twig from a heap of logs by the fire, and scratched with his left hand on the bare, sandy ground—

HELP US AND YOU ARE SAFE.

Fullarton then pulled the whim-driver's arm, and pointed to the words. The deaf man looked at them and got up to get pannikins without moving a muscle of his face.

"Can he read?" asked Fullarton.

"Yes; I have brought him papers myself. You should make it plainer."

Fullarton picked up the twig and printed underneath the former line, but in characters twice the size—

I DOUBLE YOUR SCREW.

“You do, do you?” said Dawson’s voice above his head. It trembled with anger; and next moment Dawson’s heels had obliterated every word. He said no more, however, but only glared at Fullarton with quivering fists. And when he had dipped a pannikin in the tea, he spilled some of it before he could set it down at Irralie’s feet.

“Hopeless!” said Fullarton. “They are three to one.”

“For mercy’s sake try no resistance!”

“I fear it would be useless—though the sporting thing to do.”

“Don’t dream of it! He sticks at nothing. He has emptied a revolver upon me already!”

“*Upon you?*”

The words came hoarsely from a face which Irralie could scarcely recognize, so transfigured was it with horror and rage and incredulity.

“Yes! I struck him first—with the screw-end of my pommel—on the hand.

His blood was up; but he would do it again ! ”

“ Would he ? ” cried Fullarton, as his eye roved about for a weapon ; and then, “ It was *my* fault ! ” he bitterly exclaimed. “ I should never have left you there ! But you promised to keep out of the way ; and not one of them would have stood by me without some proof on my side ; and this blackguard was my only hope ! ”

“ Not one ? ” said Irralie, in a low voice. “ Not I ? ”

“ Not even you.”

“ I think I did stand by you ! ”

“ But not because you believed in me ; out of the pure compassion of your heart ; however, let that rest. It would only have terrified you to know the truth just then. And I argued that he was on his good behavior as long as he kept up the game ; but I was wrong, wrong, wrong ! ”

He spoke so bitterly that the girl's eyes filled with tears ; or it may have been the way in which a slice of cold plum-duff had

been placed beside her pannikin without a word. In the ensuing silence the raised voices of the men outside carried to the ears of those within.

"Then that's settled. We shan't fall out about it. Thy horny hand once more!"

"I don't want no barney, you know," said the voice of Howie the humble.

"Nor I; but, by heaven, I mean her to pay for it! Now you go inside, and I'll fetch along the piebald moke myself."

Irralie sprang to her feet and looked at Fullarton in sudden terror; and Fullarton laid his hand firmly on her shoulder, while Dawson, now sitting on his heels in front of the fire, had one eye for them and one for the doorway of cold pink sky. As Howie filled it with his powerful frame, the deaf man seized a log and hurled it at his body, then leapt upon him like a cat, dug his fingers inside the tight white collar, and cracked the great skull like an egg against the door-jamb. The thing was done in an

instant, and the two men on the ground in a heap, with Howie insensible on top. The thud of their fall had been the only sound.

"Pull him off, sir!" gasped Dawson.
"He's paid me out!"

Fullarton tugged at the great limbs one after the other—at his own riding-boots pinching the ruffian's feet—until Dawson was free to rise but did not move.

"His shooter, sir, his shooter!"

Fullarton found it—loaded in every chamber—and signed to the deaf man to get up. He shook his head.

"My leg's broke, sir! He's paid me out."

His left foot lay as if it did not belong to him. Fullarton knelt and examined.

"It's true," said he. "We must shift him too. Lend a hand, Irralie." As the girl did so a smile broke over the deaf man's face.

"I didn't know whether I'd do it till I did it," said he; "but I didn't want no bribes! It's all I can do for you. You

must fix up Stingaree. Pot him as he comes in ; it's our only chance."

Fullarton unwound the bandages from his wounded hand, stretched his fingers, and gripped and cocked Howie's revolver. His dark eyes danced.

"I mean to do so," said he. "Irralie, keep out of the way—turn your head and shut your ears ! "

The girl obeyed—trembling as she had not trembled all the night. It was the worst of all, this waiting. Fullarton stood at one side of the door with the revolver. Howie had never moved.

Then the horse's hoofs and a man's feet were heard approaching through the sand, preceded by a whistle, high and clear and wonderfully sweet. He was whistling Mendelssohn again ! Suddenly, as if a yard from the door, it broke off ; the man's walk became a run ; he was in the hut, with swinging eye-glass and whiskers flying, and had shouted, "Quick ! they are on us ! " before Fullarton cut him short.

“Up with your hands,” said he. “It’s your turn now!”

And when George Young and Mr. Villiers had reined up at the Seven-mile, they found Irralie like a ghost outside in her ball-dress; and, standing in the doorway, with his back to them, and a cocked revolver showing over his shoulder, a well-built figure in black trousers and white shirt-sleeves.

“Excuse me,” said Fullarton; “but I daren’t take my eye off him. Creep in under my left arm. The beggar stuck me up on Saturday afternoon, but I swore I wouldn’t tell you till I got even with him; and, by the powers, I’ve kept my word!”

CHAPTER XIII

P. S.

At the age of sixty-eight, the late Lord Fullarton, who had been no traveller in his youth, set out to winter in Australia against all advice ; and returned to tell of his experiences for another decade.

He landed in Melbourne one October, and sailed from Sydney in the following March, but saw no other cities ; spending the whole of his time (with the exception of short visits to such near neighbors as, for example, the Quandong people) upon his son's Riverina station of Arran Downs. And he found Greville (who was on the tug to meet him in Hobson's Bay) rather stout, very brown, bearded to the chest, but most altered by an extraordinary access of energy and enthusiasm ; and very full indeed of the merits

and character of his own son, then six months old.

Grandchildren were no novelty to Lord Fullarton, whose saintliest son was not a celibate ; and the nature of the wife, whom Greville had picked up in the bush, provoked a more apprehensive curiosity than that of the child. This lasted until the exact moment when Irralie was seen rushing from the veranda with both hands outstretched, unable to say a word, but with her eyes divinely glistening with love and welcome. And of those same orbs Lord Fullarton talked so freely, when he did get home, that there were small jealousies in the family ; too small to speak about, however, and indulged in only by the husbands of the other wives, not the wives themselves.

“ Never saw such eyes in my life ! ” said he. “ The moment I looked in them my mind was at rest ; and I wasn’t mistaken. She is a girl with a true religious feeling ; uncultivated, no doubt, but deep, and sincere, and strong. The only pity is that

they haven't a church within a hundred miles of them. But I was glad to find that Greville was keeping up the excellent custom of a Sunday evening service, started by that good man, Irralie's father—who is, without a doubt, one of *the* Villierses, though it had never occurred to him till I made the welcome discovery. He is now managing an even larger station for the same company which used to own Arran Downs; we paid them a visit, and *they* keep up the evening service; but, to my horror, they neither stood to praise nor knelt to pray; and when we turned to the east they thought something was the matter. Irralie was so tractable in such things. We had *two* services every Sunday while I was there, and early celebration once a month. I only wish they could continue it! I wanted to send them out a chaplain; some young fellow with weak lungs might be very glad, and would tutor the boy in due course. It is certainly the grandest climate in the world; hot, but deliciously dry, and the night-air exactly like champagne!"

One thought Lord Fullarton had a way of expressing aloud, and quite apart from any context, especially in his last illness. "And so fond of her husband!" he would end long silences by exclaiming. "I never saw anything like it in my life!"

"You mean Irralie, of course?"

"Well, my dear, I did; and you'll understand it when they come over. I was thinking of the day after I got there. They had been telling me the rights of that extraordinary affair which got into the papers, you remember, immediately after Greville's arrival. They don't know yet who the wretched man really was; but he's in Darlinghurst Gaol, at Sydney, for the term of his life; and I felt I should like to visit him when I was there, but the authorities dissuaded me. Well, they had shown me the pianos he played on, and Greville had explained (what I never could quite understand) why it was he didn't himself say what had happened to him when he first arrived. The whole affair hinged on that, if you re-

member ; but I quite understood when he told me what was the general attitude toward young fellows from home, or 'new chums,' as they call them in the bush. They are always ready to make fools of them, as Greville found out on his way up-country ; and he felt his life wouldn't be worth living there if he arrived upon the scene with such an ignominious tale. So he kept it to himself. And the very next day after my arrival, Irralie took me out in a buggy and showed me just where everything happened.

"She showed me the clump of trees and the exact spot where she and Greville first met, and the gate where she escaped from the bushranger, and the place in the fence where the wretched man recaptured her. On the farther side of that same paddock (as they call it) is the Seven-mile hut where the tables were eventually turned. But we didn't go quite as far on that occasion ; and when we got back, Irralie showed me a most impressive thing—a clearing in a pine plantation, and the grave of a poor young

fellow who was shot by another outlaw some years before. His family had actually had a broken column sent up from Melbourne and erected to his memory in that desolate spot. I was only sorry it was not a cross.

“But it was Greville who took me into the iron-store in which they shut him up, and from which Irralie helped him to escape. He showed me the sheet of corrugated iron she unfastened to get him out. They keep it in their room to this day.”

Lord Fullarton had made friends with many of the men, who, it is to be feared, did not always receive his ministrations in the spirit his simple mind supposed. He described his son, however, very justly, as being “particularly fortunate in his overseer; an earnest-minded young man with whom I had many conversations on spiritual matters. He has been on the station for years, and is not likely to leave (I should say), judging by his really beautiful devotion to Greville and Irralie alike, to say nothing of the boy.” And another charac-

ter who impressed him was "a decent, rugged soul, who does all the odd jobs about the homestead, and is Irralie's *factotum* ; unluckily, the poor fellow is quite deaf, but I both spoke and read into his ear-trumpet, and he faithfully promised to be confirmed."

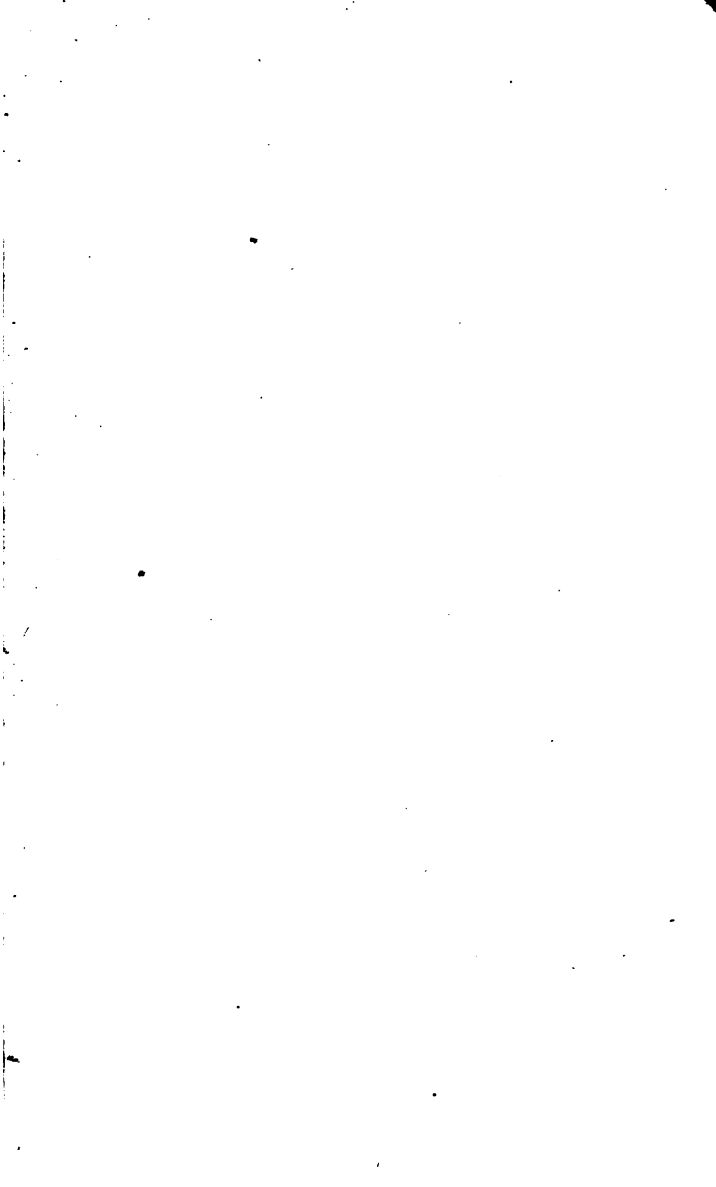
The great wish of his last months was to live long enough to see his son and Irralie when they brought the boy over to send him to his first school. And this wish crystallized in the desire to look once more in Irralie's eyes.

"They are like her own native skies," said the late lord, simply. "I never saw them wet, nor yet cloudy, but twice while I was there. The first time was when I arrived, and the second when I bade her good-by."

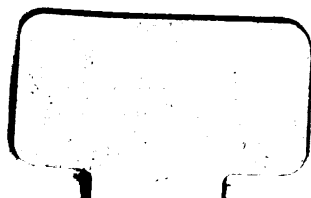
But there came a third.

THE END.









IRRALIE'S
BUSH-RANGER

E. W. HORNUNG